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Ten Sources for Background Research – why you shouldn't look for archaeological sites on your desktop

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Usually one of the first steps of a "Phase I/Class I, etc. archaeological survey", is checking the list of previously recorded archaeological sites at the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), or the list of National Register of Historic Places (NRHP).

Make no mistake, these sources should certainly be included in the background research. The problem is, many times, these sources ARE the background research. SHPO archives are full of these reports.

This is perfectly ok of course, assuming that the only type of archaeological site you wish to know about are those:

- located in area of the previous surveys;
- recognizable to the expertise and interest of the archaeologist who performed the survey, and;
- properly recorded as archaeological sites in the SHPO records.

On the other hand, if your goal is to develop better expectations about the types of sites that might be expected in the project area, additional resources warrant consideration.

The following suggestions, listed in no particular order, do not represent an exhaustive list, nor are they appropriate for every situation. Simply, they are additional sources you can use to help provide a clearer picture of the types of archaeological resources that may be present in a particular area.

1 - Consider what types of resources that might be affected by the project

The first, and perhaps, most important source is the project itself. You may not be an expert in archaeology, but you can make a good faith effort to think about what types of archaeological sites might be impacted by your project. Will the project create something very tall, or will it be something in the ground; is it something long and linear, or something restricted to a small parcel? Don't forget about effects that might extend beyond your project boundaries.

For example, if your project involves extensive excavation, it has the potential to impact sites that may not be visible on the ground surface.

Which is important to know since during previous archaeological surveys in your project area the archaeologists simply walked over the ground, looking for sites on the surface, unaware of the prehistoric sites deeply buried by flood deposits.

2 - Consult historic maps

Historic maps can provide information about previous land use and the location of features that may no longer be immediately obvious. A map might tell you that the lonely county road intersection once was a crossroads town with a half-dozen structures, or that the cluster of trees in the farm field is really close to the mapped location of a small family cemetery.

3 - Consult local histories

Local histories can add more information – perhaps explaining that the crossroads town declined when it was bypassed by the railroad, in favor of the next town over. Or that the family cemetery contained some of the county's earliest settlers.

4 - Talk to local historians

Similarly, local historians can provide additional detail and information that may not be widely available. For instance, the historian might be able to show you sources explaining that most of the buildings from the crossroads town were carefully dismantled and moved after the railroad went in to the next town.

5 - Talk to long term local residents

Local residents can provide perspective that is simply unavailable to someone from outside the community. They can share their concerns about a particular site, they can tell you the rectangular depression is a borrow pit for topsoil dug within the last 20 years, not a historic feature. They can also tell you about the stories their grandfather told them about the earthen mound back in the woods.

6 - Talk to tribal elders

Federal agencies have special responsibilities toward Indian Tribes because federally recognized tribes are sovereign governments entitled to "government to government consultation". This is a formal process, but can be as informal as the tribe and agency agree. Regardless of who conducts the consultation, tribal elders can provide unique information about the history of your area. For instance, they can communicate their concerns about parts of the landscape with spiritual meaning. Particularly important if these areas lack the types of artifacts or features recognizable to archaeologists.

7 - Conduct a “windshield survey”

Simply driving through the area looking for sites or buildings that look old can help. Sometimes the intense focus on the specific project limits can cause you to miss things that are just outside the boundaries. A windshield survey can help you spot the cemetery located downhill and around the corner from the area planned planned for dewatering discharge.

8 -Talk to artifact collectors

Like local residents, artifact collectors can know more about your project area than any specialist. They can tell you about the artifacts eroding out of the creek bed or how they used to find artifacts every time it rained before the local farmers went to no-till.

9 - Review environmental information

Information about the geology, physiography, and past climates is important to understand where sites may occur. People in the past may have been using places that no longer even exist – like the former banks of the now-channelized stream in your project area.

10 - Conduct remote sensing

Remote sensing provides information not visible from the ground. Aerial photography, satellite imagery, or other similar information can help locate the stream bank, or reveal the presence of prehistoric earthworks leveled by years of agricultural activity.

Conclusion

In addition to learning the locations of previously recorded sites background research can also help you:

- determine what types of sites might occur in your project area;
- understand what these sites might look like;
- learn what environmental, historic, or other factors might have influenced their location;
- decide what sort of expertise might be needed to locate and evaluate them, and;
- develop sufficient expectations about how to manage them.

Background research is integral to any archaeological project, but unless the information shows it is nearly impossible for archaeological sites to be present, research alone rarely eliminates the need for field investigation.

Field verification is still necessary to confirm the background information, much of which may be subject to error and bias.

But comprehensive background research can better prepare you to predict what types of archaeological sites are located in your project area and equip you to manage them.

These are just a few of the places you can look for background information about your project area. Each of these sources can provide unique information about the types of archaeological resources that might occur in or near your project. Some of them are more passive or are limited in the information they provide – historic maps for example, either will or won't show certain types of information by their very nature.

The take home point here is to take the information from these, or other sources, and actually think about it. Put some genuine effort into the "good faith effort" necessary for meaningful consultation. It will help identify aspects of the archaeological record people care about and contribute to more informed decision-making.