

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) for Historic Archaeology

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

☒ What kind of historic documents should I be sure to check during my background research?

- ☉ General Land Office (GLO) maps and Survey Notes
- ☉ Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps
- ☉ Metzger Maps
- ☉ Donation Land Claim (DLC) documents- check with local title company records, national and state archives, and native allotment indexes.
- ☉ County Courthouse- Deed & Title Records

☒ What other sources of information should I consult during my background research?

- ☉ State Historic Preservation Office Records (archaeological, built environment, cemeteries, etc.)
- ☉ Federal Agency (if applicable)
- ☉ Local Historical Society and/or Museum
- ☉ Oregon's Nine Federally Recognized Tribes (The Commission on Indian Services can tell you which Tribes would be appropriate for your area)
- ☉ Title Company Records
- ☉ Local Archives (e.g., Oregon Historical Society (OHS), University of Oregon Archives)
- ☉ Local libraries (e.g., their Special Collections)
- ☉ Oral Interviews with community Local Elders

☒ When is an archaeological site considered historic?

Historic archaeological sites are defined in the same way as prehistoric sites. They need to be comprised of ten or more artifacts likely to have been generated by a patterned cultural activity within a surface area reasonable to that activity, or a feature, that is older than 50 years for projects where federal laws apply or older than 75 years where state or local laws apply.

☒ When is a historic site considered an archaeological site?

Historic sites are considered archaeological if the remains are no longer in use or maintained or the structure is no longer inhabitable. However, there must be a clearly defined archaeological component (i.e., associated artifacts, features, ecological evidence). Features associated with above-ground linear sites (e.g., roads, railroads, canals, ditches) may be considered historic archaeological sites (e.g., mining feature associated with Chinese mining ditch), related to historic non-archaeological sites (e.g., tide gate, dam) or both. For clarification on whether to use an archaeological site form or an above-ground documentation form, please see ***SITE TYPE TABLE (link)***.

☒ What form should I use to record a historic archaeological site?

You can use the on-line site form that is located under our Technical Information banner under the subheading of “Forms”

SITE RECORDATION

- ⌘ What things should I be sure to include when recording a historic archaeological site?
 - ⦿ The types of artifacts found within a site (e.g., cans, glass, metal, wood).
 - ⦿ Which artifacts are temporally diagnostic – record what measurements or marks you can detect that establish the artifact’s date of use. Be sure to include what historic artifact reference guides you may be using to determine the date of use.
 - ⦿ When you are walking around the site, might there be a subsurface component? (e.g., is there crunching sounds when you walk on the surface indicating buried artifacts?)
 - ⦿ How does the site and its artifacts relate to the local landscape or local history? A thorough background research is essential in coordinating what you find as compared to the written record.
 - ⦿ Besides artifacts there may be other things to look for, for example, landscape modifications (e.g., railroad grades, canals, ditches) or historic features (e.g., blazed trees, phone line remnants, orchards, tree-lined drives, and non-native plants).

- ⌘ What are some REALLY important ideas or things to remember when recording a historic archaeological site?
 - ⦿ Background Research
 - ⦿ Artifact Identification

- ⌘ Where can I find good artifact identification guides and references?
 - ⦿ Internal link to refs
 - ⦿ External web links (but remember that websites such as Wikipedia are NOT reliable, go to original source rather than to open source references)

- ⌘ What are some key artifacts that I can use to figure out the dates of use for a site?
 - ⦿ Bottle & Glass- bottle marks, domestic style containers, bottle seals, lips, finish, and color (e.g., amethyst)
 - ⦿ Ceramics- maker’s marks, decoration, fabric or paste, glaze, paint, incisions, etc.
 - ⦿ Cans- labels, size of matchstick can openings, seams, opening & closures, shape of tops.
 - ⦿ Nails- round versus wire-drawn versus square-shaped heads.
 - ⦿ Barbed Wire- see timeline of changes
<http://www.barbwiremuseum.com/barbedwirehistory.htm>
 - ⦿ Ammunition- see AOA Historic Artifact Identification Guide’s Historic Archaeology References.

- Clothing- Styles of clothing can often lead to a relative date of site use. Be aware of the type of clothing and accessories that may be time sensitive (e.g., buttons, fasteners, uniform insignia, etc.)
 - Other- clay pipes, toys, toiletry items, etc.
- ☒ What else besides dates should I be considering when I analyze artifacts relating to the site?
- Evidence of Ethnicity
 - Gender
 - Age (child versus adult)
 - Domestic, relating to a household or family vs. business, relating to industry or mechanical or manufacture.
- ☒ If I find something too young (e.g., 45 years old) or if there are no diagnostic artifacts to determine age, do I still need to record the site?
- If in doubt, record it! If you believe it would not be appropriate to complete an archaeological site form, be sure to note the site, its location as well as what you found in your survey report so that the information is available to future researchers when it may then be old enough to be considered an archaeological site.
- ☒ If I find a historic refuse scatter, what questions should I be asking myself?
(Note: Always consider the criteria for listing on the NRHP when recording a site)
- Is it old enough?
 - Does it represent a single or multiple episodes of dumping?
 - Is it associated with a homestead or historic occupation of the immediate area?
 - Is there a subsurface component that I need to investigate? If so, why? What information is likely to be discovered that will enhance data found during background research?
- ☒ How do I record separate segments of a fragmented feature, like historic trails or railroad grades?
- If all of the segments of the feature are within one county, then you only need one site form to record all the segments. Be sure to include a description of those segments retaining any integrity.
 - If the segments are located in differing counties, then you need one site form per county. The reason for this is because Oregon's archaeological site numbering system is based upon the Smithsonian Institution's trinomial; a simple unified inventory numbering system that most states employ. Be sure to cross reference your forms from each county so that the entire site can be evaluated together.

NRHP ELIGIBILITY

- ✎ Can sites be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) if they are less than 50 years of age? If so, when?
 - Ordinarily historic sites (both above-ground and archaeological) that have achieved some cultural significance within the last 50 years are not considered eligible for the NRHP. This restriction guards against the listing of sites that may have a passing contemporary interest and ensures the site is truly historic. However, there are exceptions and those would be sites that are eligible because of their “exceptional importance”.
 - The term “exceptional importance” may be applied to the extraordinary importance of an event or to an entire category of resources so fragile that survivors of any age are unusual.
 - An example of a site that has been listed on the NRHP while being less than 50 years of age would be the launch pad at Cape Canaveral from which men first travelled to the moon.

- ✎ Do I always need to test or dig a historic archaeology site in order to determine site boundaries and eligibility?

When considering whether to conduct subsurface testing on a historic archaeology site, ask yourself these questions-

 - Given that a thorough background research has been conducted, how does what you’re finding on the surface relate?
 - Is the site likely to have a subsurface component?
 - Would any significant questions you may have about the site (e.g., site history, family makeup, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender) be answered through testing?

(If you answered yes to any of the above, seriously consider subsurface testing)

- ✎ When testing a historic archaeology site, do I have to keep all the artifacts?
 - Refer to the document- Recommended Guidelines for Historic Materials