MERIT BADGE SERIES

ARCHAEOLOGY

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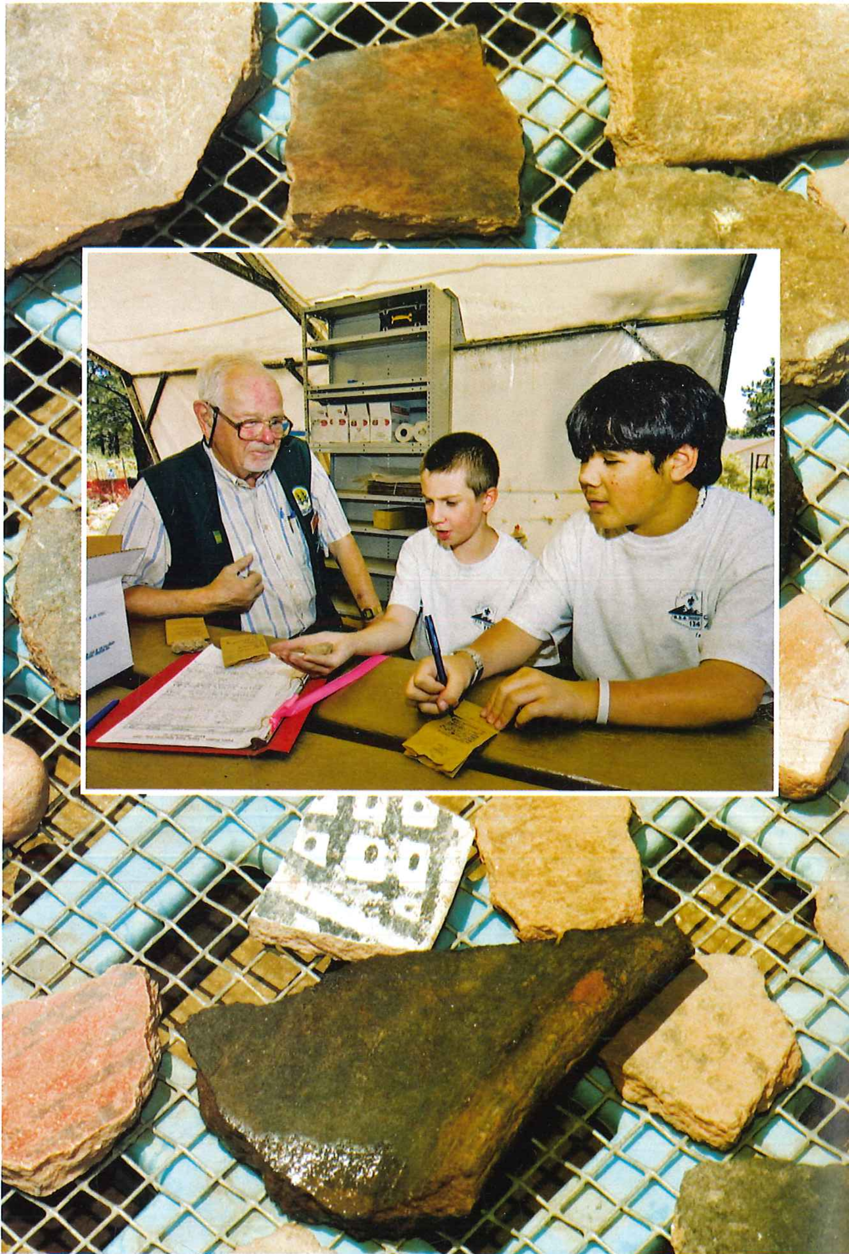


Archaeology and Responsibility

Perhaps you have been at a ceremony where a time capsule from a hundred years ago was opened. There might have been coins inside, and newspapers, photographs, and other items that people a century ago thought were important. You probably thought the contents of the capsule looked odd and antiquated, yet seeing the items helped you learn about the people who had so carefully placed them in the capsule.

An archaeological site is like a time capsule. Both contain messages from the past.

Digging up an archaeological site carries with it a duty to carefully document everything that is disturbed. The excavation process is destructive, and the paper record is often all that remains. Without careful records, precious and fragile pieces of the past may be lost forever.

After the ceremony, what happened to those objects? If one person took them home and kept them in a box, no one else would be able to view them. Or, if everybody at the ceremony took away one item, it soon would be hard to remember everything that had once been together in the capsule. Some of the items would probably be lost or given away or sold. As the time capsule's contents were scattered, its meaning would be lost.

But if the artifacts found in the capsule were properly studied, labeled, and displayed in a public place, everyone could enjoy them. People interested in the past could use the items to learn what a place or a culture was like long ago. Future generations could have the same pleasure in seeing the items as you did when the time capsule was first opened. The message from the people of the past would be kept alive, passed down from generation to generation.

Archaeological sites, like time capsules, must be opened in the right way so that the information they contain will not be lost. That is a responsibility for archaeologists, who have studied excavation procedures and preservation techniques.

An archaeological site, such as a shipwreck or the remains of a prehistoric village, is like a time capsule. Each may contain items that, when studied together, will reveal much information about who was there and what their lives were like.

Being an archaeologist requires training to learn the correct methods to find, excavate, document, and interpret sites and the artifacts they contain. We rely on archaeologists to use the right procedures so that they can gain as much information as possible when they excavate a site or lead others in uncovering artifacts. We rely on them to interpret messages from the past. We also rely on them to share with all of us the information that they discover.

Pothunting and Vandalism

An archaeologist's careful work can be ruined by a looter or vandal who steals artifacts or damages a site. These thieves, called *pothunters,* only want to find items from the past and take them. Pothunters don't care about the knowledge that might be gained from studying how the artifacts and features are related to other materials at the site. Pothunters may keep artifacts for themselves or sell them for money. In either case, the artifacts disappear from public view, the information that they might have provided is lost, and the clues in the site's soil and features are destroyed forever.

Looters, or pothunters, do serious and permanent damage when they disturb archaeological sites and steal artifacts. This historic cemetery at the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore was vandalized by pothunters.

Protecting the Past

There are many ways you can help to preserve archaeological sites and artifacts and the knowledge that comes from them.

- *Do not dig for artifacts* unless you are working under the direction of a trained archaeologist who has an approved excavation permit.
- If you see others digging for artifacts, report what you have witnessed to a local law enforcement agency or the agency that manages the land, or tell the site manager, a park ranger, or other responsible official.
- If you think you have discovered artifacts, leave them alone. If you are in a national or state park or forest, report the find to a ranger. Otherwise, contact your state historic preservation officer. (See the resources section in this pamphlet.) Experts can evaluate the artifacts where they were found, then determine whether further study should be done.
- Volunteer to help historical and archaeological societies monitor sites against vandalism and repair any damage that has been done.
- Learn all you can about the archaeology of your area so that you can better inform others about the importance of protecting sites and artifacts.

Pothunting is stealing. Such looting robs present and future generations of knowledge that can never be replaced. Pothunting is against the law on state, federal, and American Indian lands, and in many privately owned areas.

Artifacts and the Internet: The Illegal Market

The Internet has made it easy to buy and sell artifacts. This situation encourages pothunters to destroy archaeological sites all over the world in search of artifacts to sell. The problem is growing at an alarming rate despite laws that ban the looting of sites and the transport and sale of antiquities that have been illegally obtained.

You can do your part to discourage the illegal trade in artifacts on the Internet and elsewhere. Never buy artifacts that were once underground or underwater. The chances are good that the object was dug up illegally, is a fake, or was obtained by destroying a site.

Protect yourself and protect the past: If you or your parents buy "old-timey" artwork, collectibles, or crafts such as pottery, jewelry, or carvings, buy pieces by modern American Indians or other artists, or buy reproductions (clearly labeled as such) of ancient artifacts. Steer clear of purchasing bottles, coins, belt buckles, and buttons at antique shops, because many of these items may have come from looted sites.

Ozette: A Legend Comes True

Among the Makah Indians of northwestern Washington, the story is told of a great disaster that destroyed the tribe's ancestral home. The legend says that, long ago, a mountain of mud fell upon their village at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.

A new chapter was added to that story in 1970, when raging winter storms sent high waves to scour the beach at a place called Ozette. The waves washed away part of a mud bank and exposed many artifacts, among them a canoe paddle, fishhooks of wood and bone, the shaft of a harpoon, bits of inlaid boxes, and a woven hat.

Excavation of the site showed that the Makah legend is true: About 500 years ago, a mountainside of wet clay plunged down the steep, tree-covered slope above the coastal village. The mudslide buried the sturdy cedarwood houses without destroying them.

The wet clay sealed the houses so tightly that everything inside was preserved except flesh, feathers, and skins. Looms, wood carvings, wooden bowls, cone-shaped rain hats made of spruce roots, baskets, and even cloth—materials that are rarely recovered from any archaeological site—were held safe through the centuries.

The land is part of the Ozette Indian Reservation, home of the Makah tribe. Archaeologists and members of the tribe worked together to investigate the site. People from the reservation helped with the excavation and with running a preservation laboratory at nearby Neah Bay.

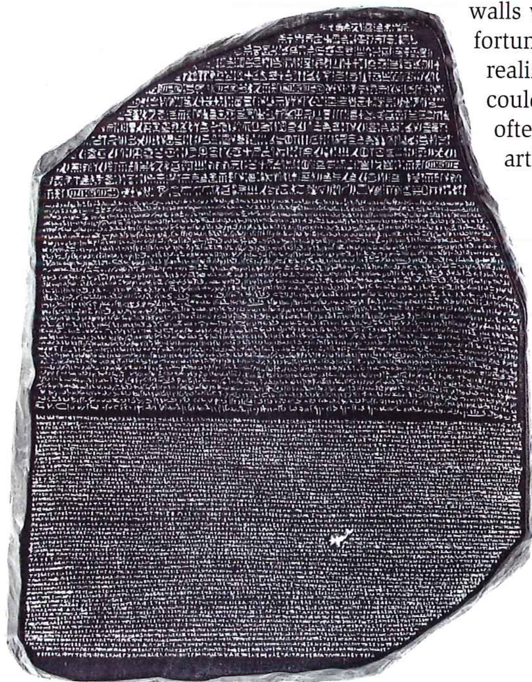
Special techniques were needed to uncover and preserve the water-logged wooden remains at Ozette. The excavators built a complicated pumping system that sprayed jets of water of different strengths—from blasts powerful enough to remove dense mud from house planks, to a gentle trickle used for washing the muck from combs and wooden spindles.

By agreement, all excavated objects have remained on the reservation in a museum built and operated by the Makah tribe. "We look in a special way at what has come from the mud at Ozette," say the Makah, "for this is our heritage."

The Development of Archaeology

Archaeology as it is practiced today is a fairly new science. Several hundred years ago, people who dug into ancient sites often did so only to find treasures that could be collected or sold. While many of the collectors called themselves antiquarians, by today's standards they were little more than pothunters.

Thieves did enormous damage. In Egypt, for example, thieves broke into most of the pyramids and tombs and took what they found, without leaving any record of what had been there. They were not interested in learning about those who had left the artifacts or covered the walls with symbols. Over the years, fortunately, many people came to realize that the information that could be gained from a site was often more valuable than the artifacts themselves.



Found in 1799, the Rosetta Stone was the key to deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs. The stone had three inscriptions on it—the same text written in three scripts, including Greek and ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. A French scholar used the Greek text, which he could read, as a guide to translate the mysterious hieroglyphs. It was the break-through scientists needed to understand the pictorial writing system of ancient Egypt.

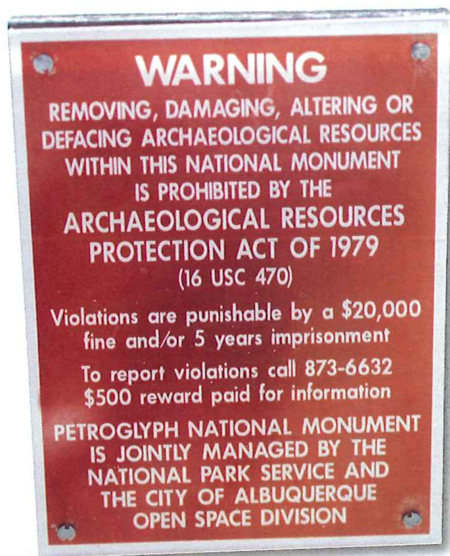
American Archaeology

In the United States, Congress has passed laws that recognize the importance of our past and the need to protect archaeological sites. The first major piece of federal legislation for preservation was an act of Congress in 1889 that authorized the president to protect Pueblo Indian ruins at Casa Grande, Arizona. Among the important laws since that time are the following.

Antiquities Act of 1906. This law protected cultural materials found on public lands and was intended to stop the destruction of prehistoric sites and artifacts in the West. It also set up a way for responsible archaeologists to excavate important sites.

Historic Sites Act of 1935. This act authorized several programs to be carried out under the National Park Service. Under this law, sites that have exceptional value for commemorating or illustrating U.S. history can be protected as national historic landmarks.

National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. At the time of this law's passage, more archaeological sites and historic buildings were being destroyed by rapid economic development than by pothunting or vandalism. This landmark piece of legislation extends the protection of the federal government to historic resources at the state and local levels. The act provides for federal grants to state and territorial historic-preservation agencies, and its passage led to the establishment of the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register includes not only national historic landmarks, but also sites, objects, buildings, and districts (collections of structures) that are significant in American history, architecture, archaeology, and culture.



The Archaeological Resources Protection Act imposes penalties on those who damage archaeological sites.

Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979. This law gives more protection to archaeological resources on public and American Indian lands and encourages the sharing of information gathered from these sites. It also toughens penalties for the unauthorized excavation of or damage to archaeological sites and controls the sale of artifacts. Since 1979, all construction on federal lands and all construction that uses federal funds require an archaeological survey. The survey determines whether archaeological sites will be damaged by the construction and how the information from the sites can be recorded before that happens. All states have similar laws that protect archaeological resources on state lands.

Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990. Archaeologists exploring the past sometimes come upon the bones and other remains of human beings. Native Americans have raised concerns that the burial grounds of their tribes should not be disturbed, any more than the cemeteries of other groups. Many American Indians believe that the remains of their ancestors should not be stored or displayed in museums, but should be reburied according to the traditions and religious beliefs of their tribes.

The Act protects American Indian grave sites on lands managed by the federal government. The law requires thousands of federally funded museums and agencies to inventory their holdings of human remains, grave goods, sacred objects, and other items important to American Indian cultures. The museums and agencies must tell the tribes about the sacred and cultural items in their collections and return the objects to the tribes that claim them.

Kennewick Man—A Survivor

On the Columbia River in southeastern Washington, two young boat-racing spectators stumbled across one of the oldest skeletons ever discovered in North America. The skeleton was named Kennewick Man for the town where the bones were found in July 1996. Scientists using radiocarbon dating estimate the skeleton is about 9,300 years old.

Kennewick Man was a survivor. His bones show he had suffered a broken elbow, a crushed chest, and a skull fracture as though he were clubbed in the head. He lived through all these injuries. He also carried a spear point permanently stuck in his right hip. The stabbing wound, like his other injuries, had healed. But the Stone Age weapon lodged in his hip probably made walking difficult for Kennewick Man, who was about 45 or 50 years old when he died.

Soon after his skeleton was found, several American Indian tribes in the Pacific Northwest claimed it under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. The tribes consider Kennewick Man an honored ancestor and wish to rebury his bones secretly so the skeleton could never again be unearthed. Tribal beliefs teach that the remains of ancestors should not be disturbed, but if bones are disturbed they should quickly be set at peace.

Eight well-known archaeologists and anthropologists sued for the right to study the bones. The ancient remains could help solve the mystery of who the first Americans were, where they came from, and how and when they got here. Only a few skeletons that scientists believe are more than 8,000 years old have ever been found in North America, and the Kennewick skeleton is in excellent condition and nearly complete.

A federal court ruled in July 2004 in favor of the scientists. The court found the Indian tribes had not shown they were Kennewick Man's living descendants. Tests suggest the man is not closely related to any Native Americans, but is closer to the Ainu, the indigenous (native) people of Japan.

Scientists were able to examine the skeleton over a period of more than two weeks in 2005 and 2006, but the skeleton remains locked in a museum at the University of Washington as people continue to argue over how the bones should be handled.