GUIDANCE FOR STUDYING LATE 19TH-CENTURY AND EARLY 20TH-CENTURY SITES

This document presents an overview of the problems we perceive and the decisions we make on a daily basis with regard to relatively recent historic deposits recorded at archeological sites on land.

Over the past decades, hundreds of late 19th-century sites (post-1860s) and early 20th-century sites have been recorded and investigated in Texas, and a wealth of data has been gathered on a wide range of site types. These investigations have been divided fairly evenly between urban settings associated with major development projects, like convention centers and mass transit facilities, and rural settings being examined for reservoir construction or mining. The data collection, research, and report documentation has ranged from idiosyncratic examinations of individual families in specific dwellings to broad holistic analyses of community-level interactions, architectural and historic landscape evolution, and fluctuations in commerce and economic conditions.

The cumulative collection of data that has been amassed is impressive, and the volume of artifacts being curated is staggering. Even a small historic midden can produce thousands of artifacts that were manufactured and disposed of during the period when the mass production of goods began to take off. The distribution of mass-produced goods across the United States produced an amazing degree of artifact assemblage uniformity. Therefore, the archeological investigations rarely provide important new insights about the historical record. What these massive numbers of artifacts almost always produce is increased costs, dramatically increased analysis times, and significant curation problems. The state's curatorial facilities are nearly filled to capacity with square nails, barrel hoops, whiskey bottles, and dinner plates. Moreover, archeological reports are being filled increasingly with redundant data and interpretations.

It is our position that late 19th-century and early 20th-century sites (a period of roughly 1870-1955) should be recorded like any other archeological or architectural sites. TexSite forms should be completed noting all archeological and architectural features observed (e.g., trash middens, wells, outbuildings) and submitted electronically to TARL to obtain trinomials. Shovel tests should be excavated to document the vertical and horizontal extent of each site, and samples of diagnostic artifacts that can document the periods of occupation should be collected. In most cases, historical records need to be researched to verify the site's age and to discover details about its occupants and function.

As with any other site, test excavations may be needed to complete the evaluation the site's significance. Historic sites that contribute scientific or historical knowledge may be determined eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places or for designation as State Antiquities Landmarks. In general, however, many late 19th-cuntury and 20th-century sites do not warrant data recovery level excavations because the data recovered may not make a substantive contribution to our understanding of the human activities that occurred at these sites.

Oral history documentation can be useful and, in some cases, can be used to replace archival research on 20th-century sites. However, information obtained from local residents should not always be considered a reliable source of information for 19th-century sites because peoples' memories are not always reliable. In one case, a contractor was informed by two separate elderly residents that a late 19th-century cemetery was present on a hill scheduled to be mined. Both remembered playing among the gravestones as small children. Based on this information, the entire landform was scraped with heavy equipment to try to identify graves, but no sign of a cemetery was observed. Only two small trash pit features containing glass and ceramics were found on the entire ridge. It appears that both informants were remembering a different ridge.

No single data set alone – artifact, oral history, or archival data – should be used to reach conclusions about the age or nature of the site. A combination of all three is best, but a minimum of two of these three sources of data needs to be included and discussed in the survey report when completing a survey level assessment.

Once a thorough survey-level and/or test level investigation has documented the physical configuration, temporal range, social history, and (when appropriate) architectural elements of a late 19-century or 20th-century site, there are a fairly limited number of cases where further archeological documentation is needed. Among (but not limited to) the exceptions are historic industrial sites, such as logging camps, sawmills, accompanying company towns, and ethnic farmsteads. Most sites from this time period are common rural sites, and numerous excavations have taken place on those kinds of sites. For those, archival documentation about the individuals who lived there, the social fabric, and historic context of the site can offer more substantive information than data obtained by excavation. Therefore, the THC emphasizes those types of studies over traditional archeology unless there is a compelling reason to excavate.

Despite the issues cited above, the THC does not believe that archeological investigations of late 19th-century and early 20th-century sites should never occur. Principal investigators are encouraged to consult with the Archeology Division to discuss why any sites affiliated with this time period warrant additional investigations and to present a well-developed rationale for conducting excavations. This includes presenting a clear case justifying why funds should be spent to investigate the site, including compelling research questions that can be addressed better by archeology than through historical research. The principal investigator must be familiar with and understand what other investigators have done with these sites, identify weaknesses in previous research that any proposed research can address, and discuss how the new archeological efforts will overcome the previous problems.

The Archeology Division of the THC expects the following guidelines to be followed when recording and studying late 19th-century and early 20th-century sites.

Criteria	Guidelines
Survey and Testing	A minimum of two out of the three possible sources of data must be included in the survey report to complete a survey-level assessment. • archival research • oral history • and artifact analysis
Eligibility Determinations	In most cases, late 19th century and early 20th century sites are not considered eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) or designation as State Antiquities Landmarks SAL) because their excavation and study cannot provide as much useful information about the history of use or occupation of the site as can archival research. **Note:** Exceptions include a variety of industrial sites which may contain unique artifacts used in that industry.
Alternative Forms of Mitigation	In some instances where these sites are determined to be eligible and mitigation of adverse effect is required, more extensive archival documentation may be the best means of obtaining useful data. Excavation may or may not be recommended, but additional archival research almost always will be needed.
Artifact Sampling Strategies	Repositories are overflowing with redundant collections of nails and whiteware, so sampling of assemblages is promoted to reduce the number of artifacts that need to be curated. In some cases, non-collecting surveys are appropriate, but inexperience field personnel should not be permitted to analyze artifacts in the field and leave them there. A professional with experience in historic artifact analysis needs to examine the artifacts so that the site is characterized accurately. Also, photographs of the artifacts left in the field should be included in the report so that the reader can see what was present.
Artifact Reporting	Authors need to cite references noting the age range for the manufacture and use of any artifacts observed during survey. Many reports state only that “modern trash” was observed, but this is inadequate for review purposes, particularly in the case of non-collecting surveys, where it is not possible for others to examine the artifacts.
Removal of Recent Deposits	The Archeology Division of the THC regularly approves the removal of late 19th-century and early 20th-century deposits in order to reach older historic or prehistoric deposits.
Standing Architecture	Following the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards, all architectural assessments of National Register eligibility must be made by architectural historians, not archeologists. Assessments of adverse effects and proposed mitigation measures should be made by architects. Archeological contractors need to solicit the services of these professionals when standing architecture is present.

Texas Historical Commission
Archeology Division
P.O. Box 12276, Austin, TX 78711-2276
512/463-6096
www.thc.state.tx.us

TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
The State Agency for Historic Preservation