FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

If you need archeological assistance, contact:

Texas Historical Commission
Archeology Division
P.O. Box 12276, Austin TX 78711-2276
Phone: 512-463-6096
Email: archeology@thc.texas.gov or marine.archeology@thc.texas.gov
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TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
REAL PLACES TELLING REAL STORIES

5/21

DESTRUCTION OF ARCHEOLOGICAL SITES IN TEXAS

BOB PARVIN

The growing market for archeological relics contributes to the looting problem.

Many clues about Texas' past are found in historical accounts, maps, and other documents. These records are extremely helpful, but they cover only the time period since Europeans began to explore the land now called Texas about 500 years ago. By that time, humans had lived here for at least 13,000 years. Since early Native Americans did not create written records, a good way to learn about those past cultures is through archeology.

Archeological sites contain materials that are keys to the unwritten past. Even the written past can be illuminated by archeology, especially when details of everyday life are uncovered that do not appear in official records. Careful study of archeological materials is vital to a more complete understanding of Texas history—from ancient times to the recent past.

When an archeological site is destroyed, the information it contained is lost forever, and our knowledge of history remains incomplete. In Texas alone, an estimated 5,000 archeological sites disappear each year. Although natural forces like flooding and erosion are sometimes responsible, more often it is people who damage the sites. No matter what form it takes, site destruction results in missed opportunities to learn about Texas' past.

COLLECTOR, POTHUNTER, OR ARCHEOLOGIST—WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Collectors

Anyone who spends time outdoors may have encountered traces of the past in the form of "arrowheads" or pieces of pottery. Some people find artifact collecting to be an enjoyable activity, and many of us know individuals who amass impressive collections. It certainly can be thrilling to discover and hold a stone tool or a vessel that was created and used hundreds or perhaps thousands of years ago.

Some collectors simply throw artifacts into a drawer or box, with objects from many different locations mixed together. These collections lack context or, *provenience*—that is, information about the location and circumstances of the finds. They add nothing to our knowledge of the past and are often forgotten, lost, or discarded later.

Fortunately, some collectors organize their discoveries and write down details about how, when, and especially *where* each object was found. These provenienced collections may contain useful information and are worthy of adding to the statewide inventory of archeological sites. Provenienced collections should be documented with photographs, drawings, measurements, and notes, with copies submitted to the Texas Historical Commission (THC) or the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory at the University of Texas at Austin.

All collectors should be aware that although picking up artifacts on one's own property is legal, it is against the law to collect on state or federal lands.

Pothunters

Looters or vandals, often called pothunters, damage archeological sites in order to obtain relics for their collections or to sell or trade. The growing market for Native American artifacts contributes to the problem. Some unethical antiquities dealers and collectors hire laborers to dig in sites likely to have marketable artifacts. Some conduct their activities under cover of darkness to elude detection, while others gain access to private property by leasing the land, or by offering landowners a percentage of the sales or a share of the artifacts recovered.

Pothunters risk fines or imprisonment when they enter public lands or trespass on private property to vandalize sites. The Antiquities Code of Texas (Texas Natural Resources Code, Title 9, Chapter 191) prohibits unauthorized digging into sites that are located on land or submerged in waters controlled by the state or political subdivisions of the state, such as counties, river authorities, and cities. It is also illegal to dig into designated State Archeological Landmarks on private property. The Archeological Resources Protection Act (Public Law 96–95, 16 U.S.C. 470aa–mm) makes it illegal to collect artifacts or dig into archeological sites on federal land without a permit.

Looters commonly claim they are saving artifacts from destruction by natural forces, construction, or even other looters. In fact, these individuals often operate at sites that would not be threatened otherwise. Others contend that it is their appreciation for the Native American culture that motivates them to dig. But the truth is, uncontrolled digging sacrifices the contextual information crucial to reconstructing the lifeways of past peoples.

Archeologists

Archeologists study past cultures through scientific investigation of archeological sites. Their excavations are designed to ensure the controlled recovery of cultural remains and preserve information about the distribution and association of artifacts, features, and other site contents. The recovered materials and field records form the basis for determining the age and function of a site, and these also allow archeologists to trace cultural change through time. Archeologists, unlike looters, publish the results of their research and place the collections and records in a repository, where they will be available to museums for interpretive exhibits and to other archeologists for further study. As scientific equipment and methods continue to improve, future archeologists can glean even more information from artifacts collected today.

Avocational archeologists, nonprofessionals who have received archeological training, contribute to our knowledge of the past by finding and recording previously unknown archeological sites, documenting private collections of artifacts, and assisting archeologists in digs. Most avocational archeologists in Texas belong to local archeological societies and the Texas Archeological Society (TAS), which offer training in field and laboratory techniques.

HOW YOU CAN PARTICIPATE IN TEXAS ARCHEOLOGY

Are you interested in learning more about Texas archeology? Consider joining TAS or one of the local societies. For information on TAS membership, visit txarch.org or call 512-245-1696.

If you are a Texas landowner, you own and control the archeological sites on your property, and your commitment to preserving those sites is the best defense against the loss of our archeological heritage. Fortunately, property owners can protect these irreplaceable resources in a number of ways. Contact the THC for more information and archeological assistance.