

Maryland Archive of Archaeology Lesson Plans

Welcome to the Maryland Archive of Archaeology Lesson Plans. This page was made to provide a resource for educators who want to use archaeology to engage their students in lessons about culture, history, language, art, science and a multitude of other disciplines and topics. All lesson plans on this page work with the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) Curriculum Standards.

Introduction to Archaeology Concepts

This information is from the Introduction to Archaeology Module (Tetrault 1996; 2001)

Lecture Defining Archaeology

Archaeology is the scientific study of remains of past human activity. Archaeologists locate and excavate these remains and study them to reconstruct and interpret past life ways, history, and culture. Archaeologists are scholars with broad training in many specialized fields--collectors and treasure hunters who collect archaeological finds are not archaeologists. They are collecting a part of a finite resource that is rapidly vanishing and may never be replaced.

Objects excavated are products of past human behavior. When sites are left undisturbed, archeologists are able to reconstruct and interpret what happened at a site because archaeologists know the context (e.g., position and meaning of an object) in time and space. Removing an artifact from its context is an irreversible act that does not allow us to identify the meaning behind the artifact.

Archaeology is a subdivision of anthropology, the study of humankind, but draws knowledge from many other fields to develop a holistic picture of the past. Disciplines such as art, art history, biology, engineering, environmental sciences, geography, geology and mathematics are all utilized making it a great topic for teachers to use to illustrate almost any topic. Because exploring archaeology is fun for students, it is a great "hook" into the study of many related fields in the social studies and sciences thereby making it multidisciplinary.

It is important to help students understand that archaeological resources are a nonrenewable, irreplaceable part of our history. Just as we encourage students to be "stewards of the earth," we hope to encourage all students to become "stewards of the past" who will value preservation and make informed, responsible choices about our cultural resources. There are endless possibilities for generating activities based on archaeology in almost any subject area. **Artifacts**, the objects made and used by people as part of their culture, can be measured and drawn to scale. **Features**, stains in the ground that indication something about human activity also contribute to our understanding of the past. The distribution of artifacts and features found in the ground give archaeologists their insights into the past, as artifacts and features are mapped, analyzed, and interpreted. **It is for this reason that it is important to leave things in the ground and let**

archaeologists investigate sites. You can help archaeologists by reporting artifacts to the State Office of Archaeology. In sum, archaeology studies the past but looks into contemporary issues and focuses on preserving our historical and archaeological resources.

General Concepts of Archaeology: Why Archaeologists Dig

Instructions

Use the information under this lecture section to address why archaeologists dig. The questions listed below should stimulate a discussion about excavating.

Lecture

Typically, archaeologists excavate sites because an area in the community is slated for construction (i.e., when a new road, mall, or housing development is planned for construction). For example, if a construction project is receiving money from the State or Federal Governments, preservation laws state that companies should consider the archaeological significance of the area being developed. Background research on the area will be done to determine if there is any reason to think the site may yield important data about the area.

If there is sufficient reason to survey and excavate, a research design will be written, a permit obtained and fieldwork will be completed according to established standards and guidelines. In other words, the archaeologist follows a set of procedures to scientifically research, excavate, record, analyze and interpret any site. In the case of contract archaeology, an archaeologist may recommend that construction be moved to save or preserve an archaeological site or historic structure.

In our community, citizens often debate the value of development, as opposed to preservation. Your students can enter into this debate in an informed way, while practicing important skills, by following current preservation issues in your community and saving local newspaper articles on relevant issues. Your students can form their own opinions and debate the issue in class, or write local politicians and historical preservation agencies to express their views.

Discussion Questions

1) When do archaeologists excavate sites?

(Typically, surveys and follow-up excavations occur when construction projects receive state or federal monies. Archaeologists write a research design for their project and complete background research on the area under investigation before any excavation occurs. If archaeologists do excavate, you can be sure that archaeologists determined the excavation was necessary first.)

2) Why do archaeologists excavate sites?

(Answer: to document the presence of human activity and to create a scientific record of our cultural history.)

3) What can the archaeologist do if he/she finds an important site on land zoned for construction?

(The archaeologist may recommend the construction be moved to avoid an archaeological site or historic structure).

Basic Information on Prehistoric and Historical Archaeology

Instructions

The following information is for a brief lecture to introduce students to the different time periods in history. Use Figure 1 and handouts in this section to discuss the general time periods of prehistory and history. Handouts will also illustrate the types of prehistoric artifacts.

Lecture

Archeologists divide the past into two general time periods: prehistory and history. Many archeologists choose to specialize in material culture from one or the other time periods, but have a general understanding of both periods of archeology.

Prehistoric archaeology focuses on the culture and history, from the beginning of humankind to contact period (e.g., when Europeans first came to America and made contact with Native American people). There is a lot of debate about when Asians first migrated into the New World (e.g., the beginning of Prehistory in the New World). While the date 11,000 B.C. from Clovis, New Mexico is typically used, sites in the southeast, midatlantic and Latin America are suggesting much earlier dates of 15,000 B.C. The problem with these earlier dates is that they predate when the land bridge would have been open in Alaska and challenge archaeologists to think of new ways in which humans migrated into the New World. It may be that there were many migrations using different routes. Archaeologists interested in prehistory may also be interested in present day Native American culture.

Historical archaeology focuses on the history and culture of all people who once settled in America in the late 1500's and 1600's. A key component of historical archeology is the presence of written records (* See Overhead: Figure 1). Historical archaeology includes sites from the time of European contact in America, to present day. Pioneer settlements like St. Mary's City, the first capital of Maryland, are one example of historical sites. Scholars at these sites study objects, such as ceramics imported from England, to fill out the details lacking in historical records.

North American Time Periods

Prehistory & History

Paleoindian Period = 11,000 - 8,000 B.C. (some archaeological finds indicate dates as early as 15,000 B.C.)

Hunter and gathering communities, constant migration, stone tools

Archaic Period = 8,000 - 1,000 B.C.

Seasonal migrating camps, refining of projectile points towards the more aerodynamic shape seen in the Woodland Period, introduction of soap stone bowls at the end of the Archaic Period.

Woodland Period = 1,000 B.C. - A.D. 1600s

Movement towards more permanent settlements, agriculture, clay pottery and aerodynamic projectile points.

Contact Period = Written documentation is available on local Africans, Indians, & Europeans

Historic Period = Post-Contact - Present (Refers to the dates in which Europeans made contact with the New World. This occurs at different times and in different places, but in the Midatlantic can be A.D. 1607.)

Lecture on Defining the Archaeological Process

Instructions

Use the following material to discuss with students how archaeology is done. Ask students these questions before and after your lecture, record their answers on the board to illustrate what they have learned.

Before you lecture, ask students:

- 1) What do you think archaeologists do?
- 2) Write their ideas on the board to come back to later.

Explain to students the basic methods archaeologists use as stated under this lecture section (i.e., **background research, excavation, laboratory analysis and interpretation**).

Lecture

Public organizations like the National Park Service (NPS), State Office of Archaeology and County archaeology Programs are responsible for managing cultural resources on public land. It is a federal offense to excavate archaeological sites on public lands unless the excavation is authorized by Federal or State officials. Private companies who hire qualified archaeologists may be contracted to excavate sites, but must follow strict guidelines, including applying for a permit. Companies that excavate archaeological sites have a staff of professional archaeologists working on one project. A Project Director will plan and direct the excavation. She/he will manage the background research, excavation, laboratory analysis, interpretation processes, of the site being excavated.

The background research includes archival research. This aids in interpreting the site and may be used to plan and organize the excavation strategy. Excavation may include a site survey and depending on the results of that survey, a more detailed investigation with excavation units may be done. Laboratory analysis includes accountability, curation, identification and various levels of analysis. Last, interpretation is the process by which data is analyzed and a report is written of what occurred at that site. An important aspect of the archaeological process is public outreach. Archaeologists may develop public outreach programs to include doing an exhibit or lecture about the site under investigation.

The Project Director will have an assistant and a staff of archaeologists to help her or him through this involved process. Often businesses are organized so that the field archaeologist will turn the material excavated over to laboratory analysts who clean, inventory, identify and curate (e.g., curate is the process where all artifacts and documents are accounted for, identified, and stored in a stable environment), them. Certain artifacts may be sent to specialists for further analysis and preservation: conservators, chemists, soil scientists, and people with a specialty in a certain kind of material culture such as, ceramics, glass or bone. A final interpretive report is written for each site and recommendations are given concerning the future of the archaeological site.

One of the important aspects of archaeology is learning about the site prior to excavating. Not until the archaeologist is familiar with a particular site, will he/she consider the next step of excavation. To learn about the site, archeologists study the history of the area they are about to excavate.

It is important to remember that excavating destroys any evidence of the past, so it must be realized that as you are removing things from the ground, their context is lost unless they are removed using scientific archaeological methods.