

How to Avoid Impacting Archaeological Sites



FEMA

Lower-Impact Demolition and Reconstruction Recommendations

General Approach

One of the main ways to avoid impacting archaeological sites with any construction project is to avoid disturbing anything below the ground as much as possible and to keep construction activities limited to those areas where structural elements and utilities already exist. The following list outlines various approaches to carry out construction in ways that may avoid damaging artifacts or features below ground. Use as many of these approaches as if feasible for your demolition or construction project:

- Major demolition/construction activities, including placement of equipment, should be confined to areas where soils have been previously disturbed by activities such as site development, construction, surface grading, landscaping, and utility trenching. This approach recognizes that archaeological materials from previously disturbed soils may already be damaged or nonexistent due to earlier construction activities, making the site a good location for demolition/construction activities.
- When heavy equipment is not in use, it should be staged on hard or firm surfaces where equipment is not prone to sinking. Paved surfaces should be used when available.
- Tracked vehicles and large-tired equipment should be used whenever possible to reduce the depth of soil disturbance and minimize soil compaction.
- Heavy equipment should not be operated on wet soils if the equipment begins to sink more than 6 inches below the current ground surface. Heavy equipment can be operated in the rain, but the contractor should pay special attention to equipment sinkage as noted above.
- If construction activities permit, shearing off and abandonment of existing structural features at the ground surface, such as footings and piers, is strongly encouraged so that further soil disturbance is minimized.
- Excavating to salvage architectural materials from below-grade is discouraged.
- Excavation of pits for debris disposal should not occur.

Activity-Specific Guidelines

Treatment of Utilities:

- Re-use and tie into existing utility trenches and corridors whenever possible. When new utility lines are necessary, excavation should be limited to the existing utility rights-of-way (ROW) to the greatest extent feasible to limit unnecessary ground disturbance. Abandoned utility lines should be disconnected and capped, and their extraction is discouraged. In cases where there are no shut-off valves, excavation should be limited within the ROW to cap these service lines.

Footing and Pier Removal:

- If it is absolutely necessary to remove footings and piers, the soil disturbance caused by these activities should be limited to a depth no greater than 6 inches below the footing or pier to be extracted. The excavation should not exceed a 3-foot lateral width from the footing or pier being extracted. Further, try to limit new foundation work to the smallest footprint feasible.

Slab Removal:

- If possible, do not remove slabs through excavation. Rather, break them up in place and remove pieces from the lot. Try to limit any soil disturbance necessary to facilitate this process.

Void and/or Feature Filling:

- Voids should be packed with clean fill from off-site. Whenever possible, use a sandy soil mix. Voids may include those created as a result of exposing cisterns, privies, wells, or basement-like depressions, as well as construction and utility connection activities.

Surface Grading and Site Clean-Up:

- Site grading should be limited to within the first 6 inches of the existing surface elevation (e.g., sidewalk level, driveway level, or slab level). Using light equipment like small bobcats and hand tools to complete final site clean-up will help.

What To Do If You Discover Archaeological Materials or a Human Burial

If archaeological materials of any kind or human remains are found during the course of a Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)-funded project, it is the responsibility of the grant recipient and the contractor to work with FEMA and its historic preservation partners (including the State Historic Preservation Office [SHPO] and interested Tribal Governments) to protect the finds until they can be evaluated. These evaluations will determine if a find is historically or culturally significant and needs further protection or will confirm that the remains are human and determine their final disposition. By law and the HMGP grant agreement, the guidelines below must be followed. If these guidelines are not followed, the grant recipient may jeopardize HMGP funding or be liable under State or Federal laws.

Archaeological Materials:

- If demolition/construction activities disturb moderate amounts of archaeological artifacts (e.g. ceramic pieces, historic bottle glass or cans, coins, beads, stones in the form of tools [arrow heads], or pieces of crude clay pottery) or archaeological features not associated with the existing structure (e.g., grave markers, or older house foundations and brick features), the contractor must immediately stop work in the vicinity of the discovery and take all reasonable measures to avoid or minimize further harm to the finds. In such cases, property owners need to immediately inform their State HMGP contacts of the discovery, who in turn will contact FEMA's Historic Preservation group. FEMA will deploy a professional archaeologist to conduct a site assessment. The property owner needs to ensure that the contractor does not proceed with work until FEMA staff has completed consultation with the Louisiana SHPO and other interested parties, as necessary.

Human Remains:

- If human skeletal remains are uncovered during demolition, elevation, or reconstruction activities, work in the vicinity of the discovery must stop right away. Property owners must immediately notify their State HMGP contacts, who will in turn contact FEMA's Historic Preservation group. Additionally, the property owner will immediately notify the local police department and the local coroner's office of the discovery. The coroner's office will assess the nature and age of the human skeletal remains. If the coroner determines that the human skeletal remains are older than 50 years and not the result of criminal action, the Louisiana Division of Archaeology has jurisdiction over the remains. Within 24 hours of FEMA's notification, FEMA will notify and coordinate with the SHPO and other interested parties, as necessary. Within 72 hours of FEMA's notification, FEMA will ensure that the notice of discovery, required by the Louisiana Unmarked Human Burial Sites Preservation Act (R.S. 8:671 et seq.), is given to the Secretary of the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism or the Secretary's designee by contacting the Louisiana Division of Archaeology at (225) 342-8170. FEMA will work with the property owner, the HMGP State representatives, the SHPO, and other interested parties to ensure compliance with the Louisiana Unmarked Human Burial Sites Preservation Act and other applicable laws. In addition, it is incumbent upon FEMA to follow the "Human Remains Policy" set forth by the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP).