

information sharing and training by making pertinent information easily accessible. This is especially true with the management and preservation of historic structures.

Note

* *Cultural Resources in the Department of Defense*, R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates, Inc. for Legacy Resource Management Program, (1991), 2.

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Stewards of the Past

Archeological Collections and the DoD

For over 60 years, federally-sponsored archeology has occupied itself with one major function—excavation. Excavation has taken many forms, from massive earthmoving ventures to meticulous layer-by-layer scrutiny of the past, and has resulted in the generation of countless artifacts that span prehistoric and historic times. Congress, likewise, has long recognized the importance of archeological sites on federal lands and has passed numerous laws, such as the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, that are aimed at protecting these resources.

Although collections from public lands have existed since before the beginning of the 20th century, those made prior to the 1920s and '30s were relatively limited in volume. It was not until the Great Depression years (1930s) and again during the River Basin Survey era (late 1940s through the mid-1980s) that federally-funded, compliance-driven archeological projects succeeded in creating both a substantial database for American archeology and a long-term problem that continues to plague the field today; namely, that the amount of professionally-appropriate museum space available for collections storage could not keep pace with the level of excavation that was being maintained throughout the country.

By the early 1970s, the archeological community recognized that outdated storage practices

and overcrowded repositories were no longer adequate. However, most federal funding for archeology continued to go toward compliance-driven excavation and not long-term management of collections, even though federal laws call for both. Between 1970 and 1990, many collections became seriously compromised due to inappropriate storage methods, general neglect, and lack of funds.

In September 1991, the National Park Service released 36 CFR Part 79, a regulation that established guidelines to be followed by federal agencies to properly curate prehistoric and historic cultural materials and their associated documents. Shortly after publication of this regulation, the Department of Defense (DoD) Legacy Resource Management Program entered into an agreement with the newly established U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Mandatory Center of Expertise for the Curation and Management of Archeological Collections, located at the Corps' St. Louis District, to identify and locate all DoD archeological collections, assess their condition, and estimate the requirements needed for their long-term management.

Identification began with a blanket literature review of all pertinent written information pertaining to archeological work on DoD land; the hypothesis being that the documents would, in turn, lead to locating the collections. Though

tedious, the strategy proved effective in locating the 200-plus repositories holding over 18,000 cubic feet of archeological material and 2,500 linear feet of associated documents from 196 military installations across the country.

Once a collection, defined here as artifacts and associated records, was identified, the next steps were to physically visit and inspect the materials and then form recommendations as to their future curation needs. Information gathered from these phases included collection size and composition—two pieces of information critical to understanding specific conservation and long-term care requirements of the collection.

Also gathered was information on the level of labeling and extent of processing in order to determine how locatable and accessible a collection is and what work has been done and what work remains to be completed before materials are ready for long-term storage.

Equal emphasis was placed on the examination of both artifacts and records during the inventory process. Documentation is an extremely important part of any archeological collection. If this documentation is not stored properly, the artifacts become the only tangible evidence that the site ever existed. Further, if the records are not maintained and the artifacts are poorly curated, future research using the artifacts may be extremely limited if not impossible.

Because curation has been neglected, long-term management of federal collections has been uneven and collections are often housed in repositories that are inadequate for long-term storage. These facilities may possess staff with training in curatorial practices, but may not possess the necessary infrastructure to accommodate the range of curation needs that some collections require. Similarly, collections located in institutions that purport to be long-term curation facilities may still reside in substandard containers. In some cases these collections have been neglected for decades, remaining untouched since they were excavated.

Not all long-term repositories are in such dire straits. In fact, several were visited that serve as excellent examples of proper curation and collections management. However, until a national strategy for collections management is adopted and the necessary funding is made available, proper curation facilities will continue to be the exception rather than the rule.

To date, the DoD response to curation has been comprehensive and far reaching. For instance, the agency has developed a national plan to inventory all collections from their lands; used the findings of the inventory to illustrate the need for better collections management and begun to identify professional repositories to meet these needs; and begun to address rehabilitation of its materials so that they can be preserved by professionals, cataloged for easy access, and used by interested researchers.

Implementation of these steps will help to ensure that DoD archeological collections receive proper, standardized care by qualified individuals and will help validate the considerable financial investment made by the American taxpayer for archeology by allowing for greater use of the collections for research and general educational pursuits.

References

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