

# Cultural Resources and Your Conservation Plan

Natural Resources Conservation Service



## What are Cultural Resources?

Do you enjoy looking at your family's photograph albums or hearing stories about your parents and grandparents? Are family traditions important to you? Most of us are interested in our personal histories. We want to know about the past because it helps us recognize who we are, how we became what we are, and how we are similar, as well as different, from others.

In a broader sense, it is important to all of us to preserve our North American cultural heritage—a legacy of more than 10,000 years. Learning about these roots of human development teaches us something about humanity and what shapes it and how much it can accomplish.

It is sometimes difficult to piece together the story of humankind. These stories await discovery in the fragile traces of the past. We call these traces of the past cultural resources, and many of these traces are preserved on the surface and in the soils of our farms and cities.

Simply stated, cultural resources are all the past activities and accomplishments of people. They include buildings, objects made or used by people (artifacts), locations, and less tangible resources such as dances, stories, and holiday traditions.

The cultural resources that the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) deals with most often are known as historic properties. These may be prehistoric or historic sites, buildings, structures, features, or objects. The most common types of historic properties NRCS employees encounter are non-structural archaeological sites. These often extend below the soil surface and must be protected when conservation practices are used that disturb the earth at the site. Cultural resources are non-renewable. There is no way to "grow" a new archaeological site or historic house once it has been destroyed.

## Why Does NRCS Care About Cultural Resources?

### Resource Conservation

NRCS considers cultural resources in its conservation planning for the same reason it protects the natural resources—the soil, water, air, plants and animals—on your property. Keeping natural resources in balance helps provide the basis for a healthy and profitable farm environment; keeping cultural resources provides the basis for understanding our human past. We are all stewards of the soil and water on our property, the organisms that inhabit it, and the heritage information that it contains.

### It's the Law

Recognizing the importance of cultural heritage, Congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) in 1966. This Act established a national policy for protecting important cultural resources. The NHPA requires federal agencies to consider cultural resources in its activities, and to determine if significant historic properties will be adversely affected by those activities. NRCS has established procedures for training its field personnel and soil and water conservation district (SWCD) partners to recognize cultural resources during conservation planning and to protect those resources from earth-disturbing conservation activities.



# Cultural Resources Field Procedures

NRCS seeks to identify, evaluate, and avoid destroying important cultural resources. Any practice that requires federal assistance or funding must follow these cultural resources protection procedures:

Step 1: Decide if the proposed conservation activity is earth-disturbing. The most common conservation undertakings are terraces, diversions, tiling, and wetland restorations.

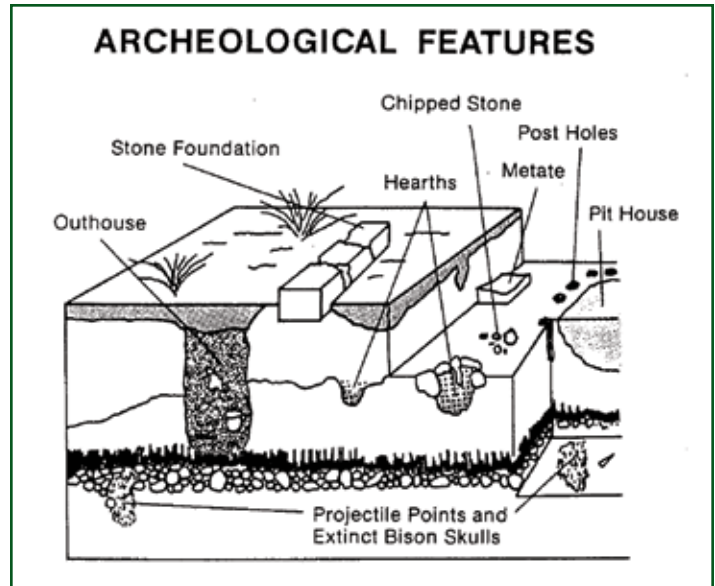
Step 2: Determine the entire area that will be altered during construction of conservation practices.

Step 3: Look over the area for evidence of cultural resources. This step will be performed for free by a trained NRCS/SWCD conservationist. A professional archaeologist may visit the project site to help determine the boundaries of the cultural resource.

Step 4: Avoid the cultural resource if one is present. This may involve moving the location of the practice or selecting a different, non-destructive conservation practice. Most projects with cultural resources present will come to this conclusion.

Step 5: If the cultural resource cannot be avoided, a professional archaeologist or historian will evaluate the importance of the property. The expense of professional investigation is the responsibility of the landowner, and cannot be supported with cost-share funds.

Step 6: If the cultural resource is determined to be non-significant, the landowner and NRCS may proceed with the conservation practice. However, if the resource is significant, and an alternative practice cannot be agreed upon, the cultural resource must be mitigated. Mitigation is an action that reduces the harmful impact. It may consist of moving a historic building out of harm's way or documenting its architecture before destruction; excavating an archaeological site; or building a protective barrier around the historic property. If a landowner does not want to pay for site evaluation or mitigation and no alternative conservation plan can be implemented, NRCS will withdraw assistance on conservation activities at that site. Landowners always have the option of installing conservation practices at their own expense.



## Procedure for Discovery During Construction

If artifacts, building foundations or human remains are uncovered, the contractor must stop work and contact NRCS. If human remains are disturbed, landowners also are required by Missouri state law to contact law enforcement.

While artifacts are the property of landowners, human burials are under the jurisdiction of the state. Any person or entity who knowingly disturbs, destroys, vandalizes or damages a human burial site commits a Class D felony.

## Additional Information

For more information about cultural resources, contact NRCS at your local USDA Service Center. To locate the NRCS office nearest you, look in the phone book under U.S. Government, Department of Agriculture, or visit the Missouri NRCS website at [www.mo.nrcs.usda.gov/contact](http://www.mo.nrcs.usda.gov/contact).



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