

Recording Archaeological Sites Is Important!

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State Archaeologist



WHY DO I think it's important that *everyone* record their site locations with the OSA? Dale Clark, longtime IAS member, says it best:

The single most important thing that has been passed to me by the Pidcocks* is that the documentation gives

an artifact a history and allows you to learn about each artifact and how it fits into the puzzle that we call life.

By "documentation" Dale means the locational data and other information on context—topography, drainage, ground cover, and previous disturbance—that gives an artifact find its character and comparative value for learning about how past people used the Iowa landscape. For me Dale's insightful comment—and the Pidcock's wisdom—really sum up the importance of documentation and hence recording sites.

I'm aware that some people are reluctant to record site locations for fear that use of their own property might be restricted. Actually, I hope all of you are recording, at least for your own purposes, your find locations. Perhaps I can convince you that recording these locations with the OSA is a win-win scenario. Here's some correspondence I recently exchanged on the matter that helps to explain the implications of site recording. Names are fictional and locational details omitted to protect confidentiality.

Related information is available in two OSA pamphlets:

The Archaeological Steward: Documenting Collections and,

Iowa Archaeology and You: Protecting Iowa's Archaeological Resources for the Future.

*Thelma and D. E. "Pid" Pidcock have been IAS members for nearly 40 years and have recorded over 130 sites.

September 25, 2007

Dear Mr. Iowa:



I understand your concerns and appreciate that you are at least willing to consider sharing the location of your discovery. I believe many people all across the state have similar concerns.

First, I must state that I wish listing a site in our records meant they were truly protected from harm. Archaeological sites are nonrenewable resources—once gone, there is no new supply (nobody is making axes like the one you found anymore!). I also wish it were possible to insure that every landowner's rights could also be protected as they desired. As it happens, the fact that an archaeological location is included in our records gives it precious little, if any, real protection from destruction—planned or accidental—and as many landowners will tell you, the larger society can constrain everyone's dreams. I can assure you, however, that by state law all artifacts found on your property belong to you as the landowner. I can also assure you that, again by law, archaeological site locations are confidential and not subject to Iowa's open records requirements.

Most activities a private landowner might contemplate involving substantial ground disturbance and thus potential disturbance to an archaeological site, such as building a swimming pool, grading a new driveway, getting a cable installed, or even subdividing property, are not regulated or permitted in any fashion that requires compliance with any laws governing archaeological sites. This means the presence of the axe you discovered, even hundreds of similar axes, wouldn't restrict these sorts of development. This is why many archaeological sites have been—and continue to be—destroyed with no recordation of any sort.

An exception is the accidental discovery of human remains as these *are* protected by Iowa Code (www.uiowa.edu/~osa/burials/generalinfo.pdf). Even so, the presence of human remains is often dealt with by professional removal and reburial at a protected location after suitable consultation with agencies and tribes as appropriate to the situation.

Let me also be clear on another matter: if an archaeological site is *not* recorded in the Iowa Site File, it does *not* preclude it from posing restrictions on future ground-disturbing activities. This is because decisions about archaeological resources are only partly based on the known record. Also important is what exists "out there" on the landscape whether exposed on the surface or buried in the ground. Specifically, federally funded or permitted projects such as cell towers, highways, wetland impacts, to name but a few types, are typically required to comply with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. Such compliance usually starts with a records check of OSA's files *but then*—regardless of whether anything is recorded in our files—continues with a field survey of the planned project impact area. A field survey of this sort would identify the source of your axe, assuming there are other related materials to be found.

This latter idea is an important point worth considering: "assuming there are other related materials to be found." If the axe you found proved to be the *only* archaeological item in the immediate area (for example within 100–200 feet of the point of discovery), then I can assure you there will be no restrictions of any kind from an archaeological perspective on future use of the area simply because there is no remaining archaeological context—the axe was moved and there is nothing else. *Even so, we would still want the information in the Iowa Site File* as a record of where there once was an archaeological deposit as these data are very informative regarding understanding how people in the past chose to settle the landscape. We estimate that at least 25 percent of all the recorded archaeological site locations we have in the Iowa Site File have been completely destroyed and exist only on maps and drawings, in photographs, and in the recovered artifacts themselves. So recording a site in our file is a form of preservation that continues regardless of landscape changes.

If, on the other hand, the axe you found is one of hundreds or even thousands of other artifacts, perhaps representing a dense village deposit, then a Section 106 field survey will surely discover the location regardless of whether the site is recorded in our file. Sometimes these surveys occur only shortly before planned construction activities or when design plans are pretty well set. Discovery of a large, significant archaeological site can then be upsetting to project plans if an expensive re-engineering effort or mitigation excavation becomes required.

However, if such an archaeological site was "on the map" ahead of time, the pre-survey records check—which often happens much earlier in the planning stages of a project—would reveal the information and perhaps lead to a simple realignment or some other accommodation in the project that would avoid impact, preserve the nonrenewable resource, but also allow the project to proceed. I prefer to see such win-win situations! As an extension of this example, if a project were proposed in your area that you wished wouldn't occur, the recorded presence of an archaeological site might serve as a useful tool for leveraging project realignment.

All in all, I believe strongly that our society benefits from knowledge about the past—each axe location that is recorded is another small piece of the very large and very complex puzzle about where we came from and why—and we need all the help with this we can get! Congress, in its wisdom, passed the NHPA because it was convinced that historic preservation is in the best interest of the people. Take a look at the National Park Service website for more on this idea: www.nps.gov/archeology.

Lastly, you might be interested in the following website, I-Sites, the on-line version of the Iowa Site File: kodiak.gis.iastate.edu/isites.

This is a map program that you can use to navigate to your location so you can get a sense of how many archaeological site locations have been previously recorded in your area—or perhaps how few.

Please let me know your thoughts or if you have any additional concerns.

Sincerely,
John F. Doershuk

September 26, 2007

Dear Mr. Doershuk:

I was surprised, while viewing the I-Sites map, at how few artifacts have been located near our farm. We have discussed your previous e-mails and have decided to allow you to record in the Iowa Site File the location of the axe we found. This axe was located in a hay field which overlooks (approximately 300 yards from) the Des Moines River. This field is on our farm, which has a legal description as follows:

The SW $\frac{1}{4}$ of SW $\frac{1}{4}$ and the west ten acres of the N $\frac{1}{2}$ of Government Lot 6. All in Section X, Township YYN. Range ZZ E.

The finding of this axe head has really spurred my interest in Indian artifacts. I plan on checking this hay field (as well as the rest of my farm) further, after the cattle have grazed the cover off, later this fall. I will let you know if any other items of interest are located.

Thanks for taking the time to discuss this matter with us. If you need any further info regarding this find, let me know.

Sincerely,
Mr. Iowa

September 27, 2007



Dear Mr. Iowa:

Wonderful! Thank you for contributing to our knowledge base about the past. I hope to have the opportunity to meet you and your wife at some point. I'll let you know if I'm in the area.

We will start with a small site area, probably just an area around 30 feet in diameter centered at the location you specify. I've attached a file with two map views of your property—please confirm I'm in the right place. Does the little white hand—the mouse pointer—designate the axe find location well or should it be moved? If you can mark the map digitally and send it back it would be great, or you could print it, mark the location, and mail it to me. In the future we will have an Internet-based interactive map that will greatly simplify for everyone the communicating of site locations.

If you find more items at a later date in the vicinity, just let me know and we can expand the boundaries accordingly or add another site definition to the file. Remember, you don't need to collect everything! It is okay to leave items in place as it preserves the context and association of the finds. If you do collect materials, especially if from different landforms or parts of your property, keep them in separate containers and put a card in with locational information (such as the legal description; the more precise, the better).

Thanks again for recording your artifact find in the Iowa Site File!

Sincerely,
John F. Doershuk