

Archaeology at the Straits



Archaeology is the scientific study of the ground to learn more about the past. Archaeologists are detectives, studying clues as they slowly and carefully dig down through the ground. The artifacts and features that they discover are important clues that tell us about the kinds of houses people lived in, what they ate, how they dressed, some of their activities and jobs, what things they made and many other details about everyday life.

An archaeologist begins their job of excavating by dividing the ground into sections called squares or quads. First, a starting position is chosen. This is a spot on the edge of the dig where all measurements will start and everything will be measured from. Next, the area is divided into ten-foot squares, like a giant checkerboard.

Archaeologists then peel away the sod. Slowly, using small trowels, they gently dig down through the layers of dirt. Usually they find the most recent artifacts toward the top or surface level. The oldest artifacts are deeper in the soil. All the dirt is carefully sifted through a screen to recover even the tiniest artifacts—at Fort Michilimackinac those are items like small beads and fish scales.

When an artifact is found, a careful drawing is made noting the depth, type of soil and the item's position within the square. It is then put into a specially numbered paper sack that contains the other artifacts from the same location.

Larger artifacts are photographed in situ, meaning "as they lay". An artifact is never moved until a complete record is made. In this manner, the entire site is slowly and methodically uncovered and recorded.

Historical documents, such as maps, drawings, written descriptions and photographs are used by archaeologists to supplement the information they find in the ground.

If the artifacts are identified, they can analyze the artifact patterns. If many items or certain items are located in a general area, a generalization can be made about that spot. For example, if a lot of fish bones, animal bones and pieces of china are found in a certain spot, perhaps a kitchen was located there. If there are pieces of metal and bits of coal, maybe it was a place where blacksmithing was done. If there are bits of guns, beads, buttons, metal pieces and many other object, perhaps it was a trader's storeroom or a store.

FYI...

Once an artifact is discovered, the real detective work begins. By identifying the artifact and noting where it was found, the archaeologist can learn more about the historic activities that took place on the site.

For example, a piece of a broken teacup found at Michilimackinac give us many clues about life there. Obviously, people here drank tea. Also, life at this remote post was not completely crude for they had nice and beautiful objects, such as this teacup. People also made a living to afford the cost of this teacup.



This teacup also tells us about the complex international trade connections that Michilimackinac played a part in. This teacup was probably made in China, shipped first to England, transported to Montreal and traded for at Michilimackinac.

The location and level where the teacup was found tells us something about its age, who used it and the people who lived in the area at that time.

When all the field work is done and they have analyzed all the data, the archaeologists can now write a report about the discoveries of the area. This information can be used to tell visitors about the site and can help researchers and historians learn more about the area and the people who lived there.

Michilimackinac is the site of the longest ongoing archaeology site in the United States. Every summer since 1959, archaeologists have scientifically excavated and carefully analyzed discoveries from Michilimackinac. All of the reconstructed buildings at Colonial Michilimackinac and Historic Mill Creek Discovery Park went through this process to find where the building had been and what activities and uses the building had. A lot of information about life at these sites and others has been found through archaeology.

While much has been accomplished at Mackinac State Historic Parks, a great deal remains to be done!

Archaeology Profile

What do the different levels of dirt hold?

Sample of Michilimackinac

Black modern soil	foil, bottle cap, cigarette butt
Mixed demolition	nails, clay chinking, plaster, artifacts, bones
Brown (British) sandy loam	Kings 8th button, creamware sherd, green bottle glass, bones
Gray (French) sand	tinkling cone, beads, fish scales, tin-glazed earthenware
Char from clearing	
Sterile beach sand	

What does this tell you about who has lived throughout the years at Michilimackinac?



Lesson 12

Using “Archaeology at the Straits”

☞ **Read the “Archaeology at the Straits”.**

☞ **Discuss the following questions with students during or after reading.**

1. What kind of clues can archaeology tell us about the past?

Archaeology tells us about the kinds of houses people lived in, what they ate, how they dressed, some of their activities, what things they made and many other different details about life from the past.

2. How can these clues help us?

The clues help us to understand the people of the past, especially if their history is not written down.

3. Why is it important to be so careful about documenting archaeology?

Once an artifact is removed from the ground, valuable information about its location and environment is lost forever. You can only recreate information from what was in the ground that was saved.

4. What will archaeologists find about our civilization and time period we live in? What will that tell future generations about our time and age?

They will find a lot of the same types of artifacts as they did earlier, but many are made differently and out of different materials, like plastic. They may not find as much material at the sites since much of our refuse is taken to a common place, like a landfill, which is farther away from our houses and moved many miles away from where it was used. However, many items will be left behind...what can you think of that may be left behind for other people to discover? Toys? Coins? Kitchen items?

☞ **Use Activities 23, 24 to further support the ideas in the “Archaeology at the Straits”.**

GLCEs that may be reached in Lesson 12:

3-H3.0.1 Identify questions historians ask in examining the past in Michigan.

3-H3.0.2 Explain how historians use primary and secondary sources to answer questions about the past.

Vocabulary Words:	archaeology	artifact	archaeologist
	Quads	trowel	in situ



Where an artifact was found and what objects it was with is extremely important in archaeology. People must take great care and detailed steps in recording information by writing, drawing, mapping and taking picture of the site they work at. If these steps are not taken, valuable information can be lost forever.

Look at the examples of some general, broad observations of a site. Try to figure out some conclusions of why this was the way it was found and what it can tell you about the site.

1. In what was once a building, you find broken dishes and animal bones in a room. In another room you find broken tools and metal scraps. What were these rooms used for? What type of building do you think this was?

2. A broken Pepsi bottle suddenly appears three feet down in the midst of 18th century artifact which you are uncovering. What happened at this site? Why was this found here?

3. You uncover dozen of clay pipes in a pile, all with broken stems. What does this tell you about what happened here?

4. Many pieces of high quality but broken Chinese porcelain dinnerware and glasses are found at Michilimackinac from the 1700s level. What does this tell you about the people of this house?

5. You are on a hill and notice a large rectangle on the ground that has a different type of ground cover in the rectangle than all around it. What does this tell you about this spot?

6. You find a lead whizzer, clay marbles and a slate pencil in a room of a building. What does this tell you about this room?

7. In a field you find a garden hoe from the 1700s, repaired with old musket parts. What does this tell you about the person that lived here? What this tell you about the community he lived in?

8. The metal part of a musket and a cap plate from a military hat are found at a site near Mill Creek. What does this tell you about this site?



Digging for artifacts is just one phase in the entire process of archaeology. Put the steps of an archaeologist's work in the correct order below.

- A. Excavate Site
- B. Identify Artifacts
- C. Discover Site
- D. Write Report

- E. Analyze Artifact Pattern
- F. Establish Grid
- G. Take Notes
- H. Wash Artifacts

- I. Test Site
- J. Map Site
- K. Re-map Site

In the Future...

...what will people be digging up from your lifetime? What will they learn about you? Think of objects you may throw away and figure out what people can tell about you from those objects. A good place to look is a wastebasket for examples!

OBJECT	WHAT WILL THEY LEARN FROM THIS OBJECT?

