

Archeological Curation and Collections Management

A Challenge for Federal Agencies

Marc Kodack
Michael K. Trimble

Archeological collections consist of both archeological material remains and associated records generated by archeological projects. The curation of these collections is mandated by public law and regulation to conform to professional standards that ensure that facilities can care for these collections forever.

Unfortunately, the state of many archeological collections and the facilities in which they are housed are so poor that the efforts and funds expended in the creation of these collections are in danger of being lost. In their present state, most federal archeological collections are at risk. Without a commitment to resolve this problem, we face losing a significant portion of the archeological heritage recovered from federal lands.

All federal agencies are responsible for the long-term preservation of our national heritage for future generations. During the last 100 years the federal government has actively supported archeological research throughout every region of the United States. This research includes not just excavations of large, prehistoric Southwestern pueblos, or mound sites in the Southeast, or River Basin surveys along the Missouri River, but also significant undertakings on all federal property regardless of whether they are on military reservations or on land administered by the Department of the Interior. The scale and intensity of this research has dramatically increased in the last 30 years because of the passage of numerous federal laws and regulations protecting archeological collections. As a result of this increased archeological activity, large quantities of both archeological materials and associated records were and are being generated. However, the curation of these collections has lagged far behind the recovery efforts. The absence of a national program for the long-term preservation of archeological materials and associated records is already leading to the deterioration and destruction of many federal archeological collections.

The Problem

The national archeological curation problem that all federal agencies currently share includes difficulties in meeting legal mandates due to lack of staff and funding, decay and loss of our national heritage, lack of funding specifically targeted for curation and collections manage-

ment, and the absence of a plan for future acquisitions of archeological collections. Specific problems with collections include loss of archeological materials through neglect and decay, inadequate storage facilities and storage space, the loss of the associated documentation, no temperature or humidity controls, no fire or alarm systems, and no pest management plan. Together, these problems result in the inaccessibility of the information in collections to the public and researchers.

To address these problems with the St. Louis District's own archeological collections, District archeologists in 1988 reviewed all extant reports of archeological investigations, visited every repository that was curating District collections, created an inventory for each collection, and finally, consolidated the collections into two regional facilities. By completion of this project, 92 collections were identified totaling over 3400 cubic feet of archeological materials and associated records. These collections were spread across the United States in Ohio, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and in an additional seven repositories in Illinois and three in Missouri. The St. Louis District's experience in addressing the curation of its own archeological collections has led to a national curation and collection management assistance program. We are working with federal agencies throughout the United States to address these agencies' curation problems.

A Solution

To remedy our national curation problem, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Technical Center of Expertise, proposes a program designed to address not only archeological curation deficiencies, but also collections management needs. This program includes all of the following:

Curation Needs Assessment

Through a needs assessment, the extent of previous archeological work conducted on lands administered by an agency is evaluated through a detailed examination of published and unpublished reports, interviews with agency personnel, curators, archeologists who conducted work, and other individuals who possess knowledge of previous archeological work. From this information a planning document and integrated database are created. The focus of this information gathering is to establish the status of the current collection and to create a master bibliography. The bibliography is a resource for planners that can be regularly updated.

Evaluation of Existing Repositories

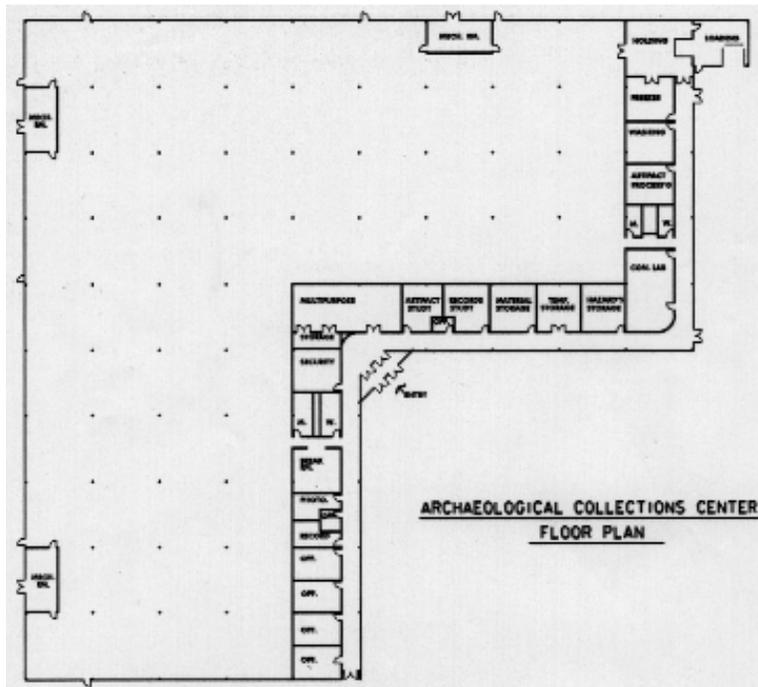
Once the repositories are identified, each is visited and thoroughly evaluated to determine the capabilities of the facility to curate collections according to mandated standards. Facilities that currently meet federal standards are identified in each state. The physical condition of the archeological materials and associated records and their storage environment are also evaluated. Each box and its associated containers are inspected for the preparation of a detailed inventory of the collection. The size of the collection, cubic feet for archeological materials and linear feet for associated records, is also recorded. If the collection is large, a representative sample of the containers is

selected. The resulting database and report enable managers to understand the composition of their collections and plan for the proper curation of the collections.

Design and Construction of Regional Repositories

After the inspection of the collection is completed, some of these collections may require their removal from the facility where they are located. New regional collections centers may need to be built to accommodate these collections. In conjunction with the Army Corps of Engineers Construction Engineering Research Laboratory (CERL), the St. Louis District is currently designing a new collections management center for construction at CERL. This collections center will temporarily house the archeological collections from the installations closed as a result of base closure and realignment.

The modular design of the facility at CERL can serve as a prototype for other regional centers. The modularity allows for the deletion or insertion of rooms according to an agency's needs. Changing the design is dependent on the kinds of archeological materials and associated records that will be processed and housed. We believe the most efficient use of available funds for curation is to focus on a regional approach to curation that brings together a number of federal agencies to share the construction cost of a regional repository. We fully support keeping archeological collections in the region of their origin.



Archeological Collections Center, floor plan.

Archeological Collection Center Model

Our prototype facility incorporates features necessary for an agency or group of agencies to permanently curate their collections, and thus be in compliance with 36 CFR 79. The facility includes:

- Security isolated task areas and staff support rooms directly associated with archeological curation, collections rehabilitation, and conservation.
- Secure collections, archives, and photographic records storage areas. These rooms contain appropriate environmental systems for controlling temperature and humidity needed for collections.
- Public areas, reduced security. Task areas include offices, support rooms and space dedicated to sharing collections information with the public.
- Secure storage areas for supplies and flammable materials. Rooms are specifically designed to withstand explosion or intense fire.

- Dedicated secure study area for the public and researchers to examine records and collections under supervision of staff.
- Mechanical room(s) containing HVAC systems as well as humidity and specialized, zoned temperature control systems.
- Task areas devoted to building security and maintenance.

Operation and Maintenance of Regional Curation Facilities

After a regional collections management facility is built, it must be staffed and maintained to professional and federal standards. Annual funding is required for this effort to ensure that existing and future curation needs can be met. As part of the management of a collections facility, adherence to a uniform database and inventory cataloging system for all collections enables the public and researchers to have access to collections information that otherwise would be unavailable. We need to manage collections for the benefit of present and future generations.

Conclusion

The St. Louis District, Army Corps of Engineers has curation needs assessments projects with military installations, Engineer Districts, and non-military federal agencies throughout the United States to identify archeological collections

derived from projects conducted on their lands. These installations or agencies are located in Oregon, Washington, California, Illinois, Missouri, Georgia, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and the 39 installations to be closed under base realignment and closure. The District is the Army's designated Technical Center of Expertise for Archeological Curation and Collections Management. Through the District's national program, we are working in cooperation with other federal agencies to begin to understand the scope of the curation problem these agencies face and move toward addressing the current condition of their archeological collections.

Marc Kodack is staff archeologist in the Curation and Archives Analysis Section, Planning Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, St. Louis District.

Dr. Michael K. Trimble is chief of the Curation and Archives Analysis Section.