

Kentucky Heritage Council/State Historic Preservation Office

DISCARDING HISTORIC ARTIFACTS: GUIDANCE FOR CONSULTANTS

Why Discard?

Historic archaeological excavations often generate archaeological collections of tremendous size. These collections take up increasingly limited space in museums and federal repositories. Through meetings and discussions with various firms and agencies, it has become apparent that a statewide policy and procedure for discarding historic materials is needed. With this in mind, the Heritage Council staff prepared the following guidelines. They are intended to assist consultants as they prepare large historic collections for permanent curation. They draw from various sources including the Society for Historic Archaeology's *Standards and Guidelines for the Curation of Archaeological Collections*, procedures outlined by other federal and state agencies, and JoAnn Wilson and Trina C. Maples' paper *Discarding the Past? A Case Study for Reducing Curated Materials, Argosy Casino Project*.

The reader should keep in mind that the guidelines are primarily intended for larger collections from Phase II and III excavations and is expected to be implemented in a flexible and thoughtful manner for each collection. It is expected that these guidelines will help reduce the growth of archaeological collections in statewide repositories, standardize curation processes across the state, and ensure general comparability between state and federal agencies and archaeological consultants in how they meet their curation responsibilities. Initial studies of the effectiveness of these criteria have shown significant reduction in the overall number of artifacts curated from large historic assemblages.

How to choose?

The decision about whether to curate an item must take into account both the *nature of the site* **and** *potential research questions*. The potential informational value of the artifact/assemblage has great bearing on the decision; however, the relationship of the artifact to the site as a whole cannot be forgotten. For example, although only the best preserved artifacts might be retained from one site, curation of every single artifact might be more appropriate for another site. It is intended that implementation of this policy should be somewhat flexible taking into consideration a site's uniqueness and an assemblage's research potential.

Three main criteria to be considered when deciding what items to discard are 1) artifact type, 2) artifact condition, and 3) artifact context. The condition of each artifact and the future research potential of each artifact class needs to be considered. For example, while it is readily apparent that whole well-preserved nails should be curated, unidentified metal items in good condition also should be curated, even though at present they may not be temporally/functionally diagnostic. The size of the object also should be taken into consideration. Bulky objects, such as parts of stoves, farm implements, and large tools, take up lots of shelf space and should only be curated if they have a high research potential.

Similarly, preliminary studies show it may be possible to source coal based on a unique chemical signature; therefore a sample of coal should be retained since it may be of greater research value at some time in the future.

Context of recovery also needs to be considered. For instance, while all plastic, melted glass, and unidentified bottle glass body fragments can be discarded from a late nineteenth century site determined not eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, the entire assemblage, even window glass, broken bottle glass, and broken nails recovered from an intact eighteenth century site should be curated, given the rarity of these sites in the state. This would be especially true if the site is determined to be eligible for listing in the National Register.

Finally, given the relatively unpredictable nature of archaeological investigations, exceptions to each rule will undoubtedly occur. Principal investigators should use their experience and best professional judgment to make informed decisions concerning what to curate and what to discard. For example, if an entire collection from a site consists only of materials that might otherwise be discarded, a sample of each artifact type should be retained for curation.

Important Considerations

Please note that **all materials** must be collected, analyzed, and stored without distinction until a final determination of the eligibility of a site has been made and the site curation plan accepted. Materials should not be discarded if a site has been recommended for further evaluation, until this additional work has been completed. Technical reports should explicitly state which materials will be discarded. Following a final determination of eligibility and acceptance of the technical report and curation plan by the SHPO and funding agency, specified materials may be discarded. The permanent catalog shall note whether materials were discarded and a list of the items discarded shall be included with the original documents submitted for curation.

Samples selected for curation should be representative of all artifact types as outlined in Table 1. All artifacts from Phase I excavations should be retained unless there are extenuating circumstances and discard has been approved by the SHPO. Sampling in the field should be taken into account during the sample selection process

Principal investigators should work closely with lab managers or supervisors when determining which materials to discard. Lab workers that are not experienced in historic analysis *should not* be given the responsibility of deciding what to discard. The decision to discard should only be made following the completion of appropriate analyses. Those responsible for deciding which artifacts to discard must have the appropriate background and training to identify the artifacts and their potential to yield data.

No staff, volunteer, or immediate family of persons involved in these processes can benefit from any discarded object. Donations to other facilities in the public domain or returns to the landowner are permissible. Live ammunition, toxic or radioactive materials, or other hazardous substances should be disposed of appropriately.

For further guidance or questions regarding the selective discard of materials, contact the Kentucky Heritage Council at (502) 564-7005.

Table 1.

Potential Candidates for Discard following Analysis

Class/Type	Count	Weigh	Diameter	Sample	Comments
Domestic					
Styrofoam	Y				
Aluminum foil	Y	Y			
Modern aluminum beverage cans	Y				
Pull tabs/Stay taps	Y				
Undiagnostic container glass	Y				Color should be noted and only undiagnostic body sherds should be discarded.
Architecture					
Indeterminate brick fragments	Y	Y			
Mortar	Y	Y		Y	Retain samples with impressions (e.g. wood)
Concrete	Y	Y		Y	Retain samples with impressions (e.g. wood)
Plaster	Y	Y		Y	Retain samples with impressions (e.g. wood)
Shingle/ tar paper	Y	Y			
Masonite	Y	Y			
Asbestos	Y	Y			Appropriate precautions must be taken when handling, disposing
Stone (except slate)	Y	Y		Y	Retain a sample of carved (shaped) stone
Caulk fragments	Y	Y			
Particle board	Y	Y			
Insulation	Y	Y			
Nail fragments (late cut and wire drawn only)	Y			Y	Retain all complete examples and heads in good condition
Stoneware/ metal water or sewer pipes	Y	Y			
Bathtub, basin, toilet fragments	Y	Y			
Window glass	Y		Y	Y	See artifact descriptions for further explanation
Resilient flooring (i.e. linoleum)	Y	Y		Y	
Arms					
Ammunition	Y				Appropriate precautions must be taken if live ammunition recovered
Clay pigeon	Y		Y		

Class/Type	Count	Weigh	Diameter	Sample	Comments
Maintenance and Subsistence					
Common clay flower pot	Y				
Fence staples	Y				
Screws	Y			Y	All complete examples and fragments in good condition should be kept
Washers	Y		Y	Y	All complete examples and fragments in good condition should be kept
Unidentified bolt fragments	Y				
Unidentified nuts	Y				
Smooth wire	Y		Y		
Chicken wire	Y				
Plastic coated wire	Y		Y		
Carbon electrode	Y	Y	Y		
Railroad spike fragments	Y	Y			
Coal, cinder, slag	Y	Y			A sample should be retained for potential source analysis
Unidentified					
Melted glass	Y	Y			
Unidentified metal: flat/thin	Y	Y			
Unidentified metal: flat/thick	Y	Y			
Unidentified metal: amorphous	Y	Y			
Plastic: modern	Y	Y			Retain potentially diagnostic whole items
Plastic: cellophane	Y	Y			Retain potentially diagnostic whole items
Plastic: unidentified	Y				Be certain the items are not potentially historic forms such as Bakelite, celluloid, or other early plastics
* Undiagnostic body sherds should be discarded within reason. Color should be noted.					

Artifact Descriptions

- Ceramics:** Because of their high research potential, very few ceramics are candidates for discard. Even undecorated sherds of whiteware or ironstone can contribute to ceramic vessel studies. Therefore, only ceramic fragments from drainpipes and flowerpots should be discarded.
- Glass:** Container glass body fragments with no discernable diagnostic markers can be discarded after color and weight is noted. Likewise, window glass can be discarded after it has been measured. All diagnostic rims, bodies, and bases should be retained for curation.
- Metal:** Very rusty nails or broken nails missing their heads can be discarded. However, well preserved nails that retain their head must be retained for the diagnostic information they contain. Similarly, screws in good condition with recognizable heads or tips should be retained. Complete examples of nuts, bolts, and washers in good condition should be measured and retained.
- Large metal objects can be discarded if they are not directly related to the significance of the site or they do not represent a significant artifact class.
- Metal items whose form is complete but their function unknown should be curated; incomplete and unidentified items may be discarded.
- Bricks:** Whole bricks should be measured, but only a representative sample of different brick types (whole and fragmented) need be curated. In addition, a representative sample of stamped or otherwise labeled bricks should be kept.
- Mortar/Cement/Plaster:** A representative sample should be retained. Pieces showing impressions of other materials (e.g. wood) should also be considered during sampling.
- Coal/Cinder/Slag:** A sample should be retained for potential source analysis. Although limited in application now, sourcing has been practiced with some success.
- Modern Material/Plastic:** Modern materials including cellophane, tin foil, styrofoam, aluminum, and plastic may also be discarded after cataloging. Be sure to differentiate between earlier forms of plastic (e.g. Bakelite, celluloid) which should not be discarded.