

Pennsylvania Archaeological Site Survey

Site Identification Criteria

Introduction

The following represent Pennsylvania Archaeological Site Survey (PASS) site identification criteria and standards developed by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

These criteria do not represent the diversity of possible site types but are intended to serve as minimum guidelines for assessing if a collection represents a site. Any assemblage meeting these criteria should be recorded as a site using PA-SHARE. Certain site types are likely to exhibit a lower artifact density than is prescribed in the minimum standards. Examples include, but are not limited to, pre-19th century sites, battlefields, military encampments, and made-land settings. PA SHPO archaeology staff can define sites at their discretion based on contextual circumstances.

According to guidance from the National Register of Historic Places, “A site is the location of a significant event, a prehistoric or historic occupation or activity, or a building or structure, whether standing, ruined, or vanished, where the location itself possesses historic, cultural, or archaeological value regardless of the values of any existing structure.” ([NR Bulletin 15: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation](#), 1997:5).

The National Register refers to “prehistoric and historic ” archaeological sites, offering a basic temporal and cultural division for site types in North America. The PA SHPO uses “pre-contact” in place of “prehistoric”.

Not all materials collected in the field will meet the criteria outlined below. Non-Site Collections are artifact assemblages that do not meet the site criteria but will be curated by the State Museum. In such a case, the Archaeology Curation Section will assign the collection a general county catalog number.

Drawing Boundaries

Site numbers are meant to designate locations of past human activity, not necessarily patterns of survey or collection. During Phase I, site boundary definition should heavily consider landform and topography. Larger site areas, including multiple artifact concentrations more than 50 feet apart, should be grouped appropriately within the same landform. Should additional investigation at the Phase II level show that multiple sites exist, the site can be split, and a second site trinomial can be assigned.

For projects limited to a narrow transect through a portion of a site (e.g., pipeline or sewer line rights-of-way or highway sliver-takes) the extent of the site within the right-of-way should be defined. The likely extent of the site beyond the right-of-way should be estimated based on topographic or other features, such as landforms and waterways. For historic sites, associated standing structures and other historic features should be included within the site boundary.

For sites in urban or industrial settings, the site boundary can either be defined by artifact concentrations, features or through the parcel boundary, if that is appropriate to the site’s sensitivity based on historic research, integrity and the extent of the property.



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Pre-Contact Sites

Minimum Standards

1. Two or more culturally modified objects (points, flakes, stone tools, pottery sherds, etc.), excluding fire-cracked rock (FCR), represent a site:
 - a. When found within a 50 ft (15 m) diameter area when surface collecting a plowed field, or
 - b. When recovered from an individual or adjacent shovel tests/units spaced no more than 50 ft (15 m) apart.
2. The presence of any subsurface culturally derived feature requires designation of the locality as a site.
3. A rock shelter containing at least one pre-contact artifact (excluding FCR) is a site.
4. The presence of a culturally derived feature on the surface that can be identified and supported by peer-reviewed background research or knowledge from a federally recognized Tribe or Nation. If the age of the feature is unknown, the site will be recorded as Pre-Contact and Historic site.

Reminder: Isolated **diagnostic** pre-contact artifacts (a projectile point or ceramic sherd) are assigned official PASS site numbers in PA-SHARE.

Historic Sites

For the Pennsylvania Archaeological Site Survey (PASS), record **all** of the following as historic archaeological sites if they are 50 or more years of age. In keeping with this standard, diagnostic artifacts used to assess a find's status as an archaeological site should be 50 years old or older. Diagnostic is defined as securely datable based on period of manufacture, decoration, and/or function.

For historic sites, in addition to recovered artifacts and identified features, documentary research and the evaluation of visible natural or cultural landscape features are often necessary to arrive at a site boundary. **Documentary sources such as historic and modern aerial photographs, historic maps, and deed information must be used in this endeavor.** For many types of historic sites, especially residential sites and sites in urban areas, site boundaries may coincide with legal property boundaries.

Minimum Standards

1. Any building foundation, ruin, or structural feature—whether discovered above or below the surface—should be recorded as a site.
 - Standing structures should be recorded as above ground resources in PA-SHARE. If the property's archaeological potential has not been investigated, then it is not necessary to also complete a PASS form.
 - Railroads and canals/tow paths should be recorded as above ground resources. If artifacts or other features are discovered in association with these resources and they meet the criteria in



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3, below, then they should be recorded as associated archaeological sites. In certain circumstances, a district could be recorded to include both the above ground and archaeological resources.

- Roadbeds without artifact assemblages do not need to be recorded as archaeological sites in PASS. They can still be documented as features within an archaeological site or district. Should you have reason to record a roadbed as an archaeological site and assess its individual significance, please contact the PASS coordinator.
2. Any historic structure, foundation, ruin, or structural feature AND any number of associated historic artifacts found within 100 ft (30 m) of the feature constitute a site. If the artifact scatter extends beyond 100 ft, the site's boundary should be extended to reflect the occupation or activity represented by the site.
- In urban settings or situations where there is historic parcel data, the site's boundaries should be defined by historic land parcels.
3. Artifact concentrations should be recorded as sites in the following circumstances. Generally speaking, the recovered assemblage must contain artifacts from at least two functional classes and include three securely diagnostic artifacts to constitute a site. If all artifacts come from the same functional class (as in a bottle dump) there must be five securely diagnostic artifacts to define a site.
- Currently unplowed contexts (including urban sites):
 - A minimum of 30 artifacts recovered from adjacent or non-adjacent shovel tests/units within a half-acre or smaller area constitute a site.
 - Currently plowed contexts:
 - If your resource shows on a historic map, a minimum of 30 artifacts recovered from a one-acre or smaller area is a site.
 - In the absence of map evidence, site definition requires the presence of 50 artifacts within a one-acre or smaller area.

