

GUIDANCE FOR CULLING INCOMING ARCHAEOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS

Indiana State Museum & Historic Sites

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The ISMHS has the mandate: ***“To Collect, Preserve, and Interpret the Cultural and Natural History of Indiana.”*** This includes scientifically collected materials from our CRM partners. Our ability to successfully steward these collections depends upon the implementation of sampling and/or culling strategies that will allow us to focus our resources in providing the best care possible for collections.

Why Cull an Incoming Collection:

As archaeologists, you are aware that phase II and III projects often generate large archaeological collections. However, even smaller surveys and excavations combined over time can accumulate into a vast number of objects needing curated. These collections not only take up space in the few archaeological repositories available, but they take additional time and resources to ensure their conservation and preservation for future generations. This has led to the growing archaeological curation crises as discussed in various academic and CRM journals and discussed by the collection committees of the Society of American Archaeology and Society for Historical Archaeology (SAA, 2003: 2; SHA, 1993: 6). Taking this in to consideration, the Indiana State Museum has prepared the following guidelines. They are intended to assist our partners as they prepare collections for permanent curation. They draw from various sources, including federal, state, and professional organizations.

It is extremely difficult and far less efficient to implement culling strategies in the curation facility. We look to our partners to implement sampling and culling strategies in the field and their laboratories instead of the curatorial facility for several reasons:

1. You have been involved in developing the research objectives and scope of the project, and know what questions need to be addressed.
2. You are knowledgeable of the provenience and context of the material being recovered and its overall importance to the project.
3. By culling the collection on your end, you will reduce the amount of material needing additional resources and storage, providing cost savings to you and your clients.

Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology Guidelines of Non-Curation

As you develop your curation plan for your collections, you should consult DHPA’s *Guidebook for Indiana Historic Sites and Structures Inventory – Archaeological Sites 2019*. After understanding DHPA’s standards for documenting non-curated material, you should apply ISMHS standards to your collection. DHPA is aware of the ISMHS guidelines. Indiana State Museum & Historic Sites culling guidelines do not negate the fieldwork artifact collection requirement in the DHPA’s *Guidebook*.

Culling Criteria

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 include are:

- 1) Artifact type - is this object very common and well documented?
- 2) Artifact condition – is the object in good condition? Is the object important enough to attempt conservation?
- 3) Artifact context – was the object found within a mid-20th century historic scatter, or an early 19th century dwelling? Does the site have potential for inclusion in the National Register?

Important Considerations

- Planning for curation should begin at the beginning of a project not at the end of analysis.
- Sampling in the field should be considered during the sample selection process. Principal investigators should work closely with lab managers or supervisors when determining which materials 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.
- Live ammunition, toxic or radioactive materials, or other hazardous substances should be disposed of appropriately. However, the museum may be interested in curating unique materials (bottles with liquids, safely disarmed ammunition, etc.). Please contact the museum to consult before culling these items.
- Include all culled material in your artifact inventory. Include the same level of detail of culled material as you do with curated material (provenience, giving the sample number, method of recovery, material categories and descriptions, raw materials, counts, etc.). **Please be sure that all non-curated items are identified as such in the catalog.**
- If you have questions or would like further guidance, please contact us for a consultation.

For further guidance or questions regarding the selective discard of materials, contact the Indiana State Museum at (317) 473-0836.

The following table was developed in careful consideration of related Indiana State guidelines (e.g., DHPA's *Guidebook for Indiana Historic Sites and Structures Inventory – Archaeological Sites* (2019) and *INDOT Cultural Resources Manual* (2019), as well as; culling strategies currently being employed by other institutions/agencies that are available for review. For in-depth information on drafting culling

strategies, see Brian Crane’s *Archaeological Collection Sampling and Discard Protocols* (2018). For further guidance or questions regarding the selective discard of materials, contact the Indiana State Museum at (317) 473-0836.

Please keep in mind that these strategies are not solely for large collections but can be used at any level of field recovery. Also, these are not meant to be a “one-size-fits-all” hard manual. Different sites may require additional consideration. If you have questions about these guidelines or would like consult with museum staff, please let us know.

Table 1.

Candidates for Discard following Analysis

CLASS/TYPE	COUNT	WEIGH	SAMPLE ¹	COMMENT
Charcoal	Y	Y	Y	Samples should be provenienced and uncontaminated. Record and discard from historic context unless future C-14 or botanical analysis may be warranted.
Botanicals				Retain all diagnostic specimens (with exceptions of modern agricultural or other intrusive modern specimens).
Daub	Y	Y	Y	Retain any with impressions significant to interpretation
Shell (aquatic and terrestrial)	Y	Y	Y (unmodified)	Retain all modified shell. For unmodified shell, sort by species, and weigh all identified and unidentified specimens then discard most unmodified shell, retaining a predetermined sample for analysis if needed (e.g., retain samples of now-extinct types). See *2
Soil			Y	Retain all floated samples and a representative sample of unprocessed soil if necessary (see section above). See *2
Faunal	Y	Y	Y (unmodified)	Retain all modified bone. Retain a representative sample of all identified faunal present and a predetermined sample (e.g., selected column sample) of unidentified faunal. *2
Unmodified stone	Y	Y		Do not retain unless contains important environmental information.
Fire cracked rock	Y	Y		Do not retain unless it contains important environmental information.
Chipped stone	Y	Y	Y	Count and weigh all specimens; retain all formed or otherwise modified tools and a predetermined sample of all unmodified chipped stone artifacts. Samples should consider context/locality as well as artifact/material types. *5
Ground stone	Y	Y	Y	Count and weigh all specimens; retain all complete specimens and those with reconstructable dimensions, residues, or other significant features; retain a representative sample of each rock artifact/material type. *5
Ceramic	Y	Y	Y	After analysis, including form & function, retain all key diagnostic sherds and samples of the remainder. All Pre-Columbian samples that are suspected to refit should be retained and samples that potentially hold residue should be retained and separated/appropriately stored to preserve residue. *5

				Completely exfoliated and burnt undecorated historic ceramics should not be retained.
Styrofoam	Y			
Aluminum foil	Y	Y		
Modern aluminum cans	Y			
Pull tabs/Stay taps	Y			
Undiagnostic container glass	Y	Y		
Brick fragments	Y	Y	Y	Weigh all; note reconstructable dimensions; retain sample with maker's marks. Other samples may be retained if needed, at a predetermined amount. *3
Mortar	Y	Y	Y	Retain sample of specimens with diagnostic features, or of a key type/material/manufacture of historic significance.
Concrete	Y	Y	Y	Only retain samples of specimens of key type/material/manufacture of historic significance.
Plaster	Y	Y	Y	Only retain samples of specimens of key type/material/manufacture of historic significance.
Shingle/tar paper	Y	Y		
Masonite	Y	Y		
Asbestos	Y	Y		
Historic Building Stone (except slate)	Y	Y	Y	Retain discernible wear marks, shadowing, finished edges, holes, markings, attachments, construction evidence, or other characteristics.
Caulk fragments	Y	Y		
Particle board	Y	Y		
Insulation	Y	Y		
Nail fragments (late cut and wire drawn only)	Y	Y	Y	Identify type and number of each type; retain a representative sample of well-preserved examples; discard remainder. *4
Stoneware/metal water or sewer pipes	Y	Y		
Bathtub, basin, toilet fragments	Y	Y		
Window glass	Y	Y	Y	Only retain representative sample of types that have been analyzed for manufacturing techniques, exceptions

				include: coffin viewing panes (please contact us for further instructions).
Resilient flooring (linoleum)	Y	Y		
Ammunition	Y	Y	Y	Retain all pre-20 th century ammunition. Sample post-20 th century.
Clay pigeon	Y			
Common Clay flowerpot	Y			Retain any fragments with diagnostic marks or unique decorative motifs.
Fence staples	Y			
Screws	Y		Y	Retain well preserved samples. It is expected that many sites will discard all. *4
Washers	Y		Y	
Unidentified bolt fragments	Y			
Unidentified nuts	Y			
Smooth wire	Y			
Chicken Wire	Y			
Plastic coated wire	Y			
Carbon electrode	Y	Y		
Railroad spike fragment	Y	Y		
cinder, slag	Y	Y		
Melted glass	Y	Y		
Unidentified metal: flat/thin	Y	Y		Retain any with diagnostic features; do not collect nondiagnostic fragments. *4
Unidentified metal: flat/thick	Y	Y		Retain any with diagnostic features; do not collect nondiagnostic fragments. *4
Unidentified metal: amorphous	Y	Y		Retain any with diagnostic features; do not collect nondiagnostic fragments. *4
Plastic: modern	Y	Y		
Plastic: cellophane	Y	Y		

Plastic: unidentified	Y	Y		

¹ Generally a 10% sample. The sample should be representative of the spectrum of features and other contexts present at the site. The retained sample should include at least one example of each variety within a type (e.g., each glaze/slip combination on stoneware, each pennyweight of nail, each type or manufacturing method of bottle). If multiple identical artifacts are present, one example of each may be retained and the remainder discarded.

² For shell and faunal remains, all samples must be I.D. to the broadest genus category. If samples need to be preserved, for large features (i.e., shell middens, butchering sites) and soil samples, one select column for future analysis, may be conserved.

³ For all material that will be saved using a “predetermined” amount, please contact us and let us know what amount you attend to use.

⁴ Do not force objects to make them fit. It is okay if objects from a particular category do not fit and they are all discarded.

⁵ Collect a representative sample from each of your analytical units (I.E., shatter, primary, secondary . . . ; rims, body, base, etc.).

Oversized Materials:

We receive many inquiries about curating large objects recovered from the field, including concrete slabs, metal rods, plumbing fixtures, amusement ride components, transportation and industrial related items, and large architectural objects. We will consider curating large objects if they hold intrinsic value to the site and human culture. If the items are very common, well documented technically and historically, we will likely decline to curate them. For special cases or consultation, please contact us.

Unique Objects:

As a museum, we are also interested in unique/unusual objects or unique stories. If an object falls within the culling criteria but has a unique story, please let us know and we can discuss keeping the object. Ex: a large cement slab falls under the culling criteria; however, if it contains a hand/footprint or inscribed name, we may be interested in it.

Sources:

Discarding Historic Artifacts: Guidance for Consultants. Kentucky Heritage Council, Frankfort, KY. <https://anthropology.as.uky.edu/sites/default/files/Historic%20Artifact%20Discard%20Policy.pdf>

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*The Archaeological Curation Crisis: An Integrated Action Plan for the SAA and Its
Partners: March 2003*

https://sha.org/assets/documents/research/collections_management/SAA2003TheArchaeologicalCurationCrisis.pdf

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