



# Cultural Resources and Your Conservation Plan

## USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

### What Are Cultural Resources?

Do you enjoy looking at your family's photograph albums or hearing stories about your parents and grandparents? Are family traditions important to you? Most of us are interested in our personal histories. We want to know about the past because it helps us recognize who we are, how we became what we are, and how we are similar, as well as different from others.

In a broader sense, it is important to all of us to preserve the past -- our North American cultural heritage -- a legacy of more than 10,000 years. To learn about these deepest roots of human development is to learn something of what humanity is, what shapes it, and how much it can accomplish.

It is sometimes difficult to piece together the story of humankind. These stories await discovery in the fragile traces of the past. We call these traces of the past **cultural resources**, and many of these traces are preserved on the surface and in the soil of our farms and cities.

Simply stated, cultural resources are all the past activities and accomplishments of people. They include buildings, objects made or used by people (artifacts), locations and less tangible resources such as dance forms, stories, and holiday traditions.

The cultural resources that the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) deals with most often are known as historic properties. These may be prehistoric or historic sites, buildings, structures, features, or objects. The most common type of historic property NRCS employees encounter is non-structural archaeological sites. These often extend below the soil surface and must be protected during installation of conservation practices that disturb the earth at the site. Cultural resources are non-renewable. There is no way to "grow" a new archaeological site or historic barn once it has been destroyed.

### Why Does NRCS Care About Cultural Resources?

#### **For Resource Conservation**

NRCS considers cultural resources in its conservation planning for the same reason it protects the natural resources -- the soil, water, air, plants and animals -- on your property. Keeping natural resources in balance helps provide the basis for a healthy and profitable farm environment; keeping cultural resources provides the basis for understanding our human past. We are all stewards of the soil and water on our property, the organisms that inhabit it, and the heritage information that it contains.

#### **Because It's the Law**

Recognizing the importance of cultural heritage, the United States Congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). This Act established a national policy for protecting our important cultural resources. The NHPA requires Federal agencies to consider cultural resources in its activities and to determine if significant historic properties will be adversely affected by those activities.

The Wisconsin Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) coordinates and oversees compliance and protection efforts. The SHPO maintains records of known site locations and those eligible for or listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

NRCS has established procedures for training its field personnel and conservation partners to recognize cultural resources during conservation planning and to protect those resources from earth-disturbing conservation activities.

## Cultural Resources Field Procedures

In Wisconsin, NRCS has established procedures to identify, evaluate, and avoid the destruction of important cultural resources. Any practice that requires federal assistance, receives federal funding, or requires a federal permit must follow these cultural resources protection procedures.

**Step 1:** *Decide if the proposed conservation activity is an earth-disturbing undertaking. The most common conservation undertakings are grassed waterways, terraces, dams, diversions, tiling, land clearing, and wetland restorations.*

**Step 2:** *Determine the entire area that will be altered during construction of conservation practices.*

**Step 3:** *Review SHPO records for known archeological sites in the area (this step will be performed by the Cultural Resources Coordinator (CRC) at the NRCS State Office). A field investigation by the CRC and/or a qualified archaeologist may also be necessary.*

**Step 4:** *Avoid the cultural resource if present. This may involve moving the location of the practice or selecting a different, non-destructive conservation practice. Most projects with cultural resources present will come to this conclusion.*

**Step 5:** *If the cultural resource cannot be avoided, a professional archaeologist will evaluate the significance of the historic property.*

**Step 6:** *If the cultural resource is determined to be non-significant, the landowner and NRCS may proceed with the conservation practice. However, if the resource is significant, and an alternative practice cannot be agreed on, the cultural resource must be "mitigated."*

Mitigation is an action that reduces the harmful impact. This may consist of moving a historic building out of harm's way or documenting its architecture before destruction; excavation of an archaeological site; or building a protective barrier around the historic property.

There may be occasions when the landowner does not want a site evaluation or mitigation. If no alternative conservation plan can be implemented, NRCS will withdraw assistance on conservation activity at that site, and the landowner may proceed with the conservation practice without federal funding or assistance.

## Procedure for Discovery During Construction

If artifacts, building foundations, or human remains are uncovered, the contractor must stop work and the NRCS Cultural Resources Coordinator must be contacted. The NRCS conservationist will take steps to protect the site until it can be evaluated for significance. Steps 5 and 6 above will be conducted.

## Private Property Rights and Wisconsin Burial Sites Preservation Law

Landowners with historic properties on their land have ownership of that historic property. Artifacts from archaeological sites and historic buildings are the property of the landowner.

A landowner may choose to disturb a historic property, but cannot receive federal or state assistance to do so. If a ground disturbing activity exposes human remains, the landowner is required to contact the Burial Sites Preservation Office immediately at (800) 342-7834 or (608) 264-6502. Human burial sites may not be disturbed without authorization from the Director of the Wisconsin Historical Society (Wisconsin Burial Sites Preservation Law §157.70).



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