
PENNSYLVANIA ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE SURVEY FILES SITE IDENTIFICATION CRITERIA

The following represent Pennsylvania Archaeological Site Survey (PASS) site identification criteria and standards developed by the Section of Archaeology, The State Museum of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office (PA SHPO), 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 the current PASS forms or online tools. 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 “pre- and post-contact” archaeological sites, offering a basic temporal and cultural division for site types in North America. The PA SHPO uses “historic” in place of “post-contact”.

Not all materials collected in the field will meet the criteria outlined below. The Isolated Find or Non-Site Collection form is used to record this material under two specific circumstances:

- to record isolated diagnostic pre-contact artifacts
- to record project assemblages that will be submitted to the State Museum for curation, but do not meet any of the site criteria.

These forms are submitted to the PA SHPO for review and assignment of a general county catalog number by The State Museum, Section of Archaeology. That numeric designation must be used in labeling the assemblage.

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.

Please refer to the PA SHPO’s [Guidelines for Archaeological Investigations](#) for more information about site identification and boundary definition for historic and pre-contact sites.



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:
 - When found within a 50 ft (15 m) diameter area when surface collecting a plowed field, or
 - 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. Reminder: Isolated **diagnostic** pre-contact artifacts (points or ceramics), regardless of context, should be fully recorded on the Isolated Find form. These will not be assigned official PASS site numbers but will be given isolated find numbers that can be used for curation, and they will remain on file as important information concerning pre-contact land use.

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.

Historic site types are diverse, complicated to define, and exist within a variety of contexts. These criteria serve as minimum standards for the recordation of historic sites, but they cannot encompass all possible scenarios. 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.

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 a historic building using the HRSF. If the property's archaeological potential has not been investigated, then it is not necessary to also complete a PASS form.
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.