

## Archaeology at the Straits

Archaeology is the scientific study of the ground to learn more about the past. Archaeologists are detectives, studying clues as they slowly and carefully dig down through the ground. The artifacts and features that they discover are important clues that tell us about the kinds of houses people lived in, what they ate, how they dressed, some of their activities, what things they made and many other details about everyday life.

An archaeologist begins their job of excavating by dividing the ground into sections called squares or quads. First, a starting point is chosen. This is a spot on the edge of the dig where all measurement will start. Next, the area is divided into ten-foot squares, like a giant checkerboard.

Archaeologists then peel away the sod. Slowly, using small trowels, they gently dig down through the layers of dirt. Usually they find the most recent artifacts toward the surface level and the oldest artifacts deeper in the soil. All of the dirt is carefully sifted through a screen to recover even the tiniest artifact.

When an artifact is found, a careful drawing is made noting the depth, type of soil and the item's position within the square. It is then put into a specially numbered paper sack that contains the other artifacts from the same location.

Larger artifacts are photographed in situ, meaning "as they lay". An artifact is never moved until a complete record is made. In this manner, the entire site is slowly and methodically uncovered and recorded.

Historical documents, such as maps, drawings, written descriptions and photographs, are used by archaeologists to supplement the information they find in the ground.

Once an artifact is discovered, the real detective work begins. By identifying the artifact and noting where it was found, the archaeologist can learn more about the historic activities that took place on the site. This process is called interpretation.

For example, a piece of a broken teacup found at Michilimackinac gives



us many clues about life there. Obviously, people here drank tea. Also, life at this remote outpost was not completely crude, for they had beautiful objects, such as this cup.

This teacup also tells us about the complex, international trade connections that Michilimackinac was part of. This teacup was made in China, shipped first to England and finally came to Michilimackinac.

The location and level where the cup was found tell us something about its age and the people who lived in the area at that time.

If the artifacts are identified, they can analyze the artifact patterns. If many items or certain items are located in a general area, a generalization can be made about that spot. If a lot of fish bones, animals bones and pieces of china are found in a certain spot, perhaps a kitchen was there. If there are pieces of metal and bits of coal, maybe it was a place where blacksmithing was done.

When all the field work is done and they have analyzed all the data, the archaeologists can now write a report about their discoveries in the area.

Michilimackinac is the site of the longest ongoing archaeology program in the United States. Every summer since 1959, archaeologists have scientifically excavated and carefully analyzed discoveries from Michilimackinac. All of the reconstructed buildings at Colonial Michilimackinac and Historic Mill Creek went through this process to find where the building had been and what activities happened in that building. A lot of information about life at these sites and others has been found through archaeology. While much has been accomplished at Mackinac State Historic Parks, a great deal remains to be done.

### Archaeology Profile

What do the different levels of dirt hold?  
Sample of Michilimackinac

Black modern soil	foil, bottle cap, cigarette butt
Mixed demolition	nails, clay chinking, plaster, artifacts, bones
Brown (British) sandy loam	Kings 8th button, creamware, green bottle glass, bones
Gray (French) sand	tinkling cone, beads, fish scales, tin-glazed earthenware
Char from clearing	
Sterile beach sand	

What does this tell you about who has lived throughout the years at Michilimackinac?



# Lesson 12

Using “Archaeology at the Straits”

➤ Read “Archaeology at the Straits”.

➤ Discuss the following questions with students during or after reading.

1. What kind of clues does archaeology tell us about the past?

*Archaeology tells us about the kinds of houses people lived in, what they ate, how they dressed, some of their activities, what things they made and many other different details about life from the past.*

2. How can these clues help us?

*The clues help us to understand the people of the past, especially if their history is not written down.*

3. Why is it important to be so careful about documentation in archaeology?

*Once an artifact is removed from the ground, valuable information about its location and environment is lost forever.*

4. What will archaeologists of our civilization find? What will that tell them of our time and age?

*They will find a lot of the same artifacts as earlier, but also plastic. They will not find much of the information right at the site, like garbage, since a lot of our refuse is taken a common place, like landfills. It is moved many miles away from where it was used.*

## MEAP Objectives reached in Lesson 12:

**I.2.LE.2** Use narratives and graphic data to compare the past of their local community and the state of Michigan with present day life in those places.

**I.3.LE.1** Use primary sources to reconstruct past events in their local community.

**II.2.LE.2** Describe the location, use and importance of different kinds of resources and explain how they are created and the consequences of their use.

➤ Use Activities 23, 24 to further support the ideas in “Archaeology at the Straits”.

<b>Vocabulary Words:</b>	archaeology	artifact	archaeologist
	quads	trowel	in situ



Where an artifact was found and what it was with is extremely important in archaeology. People must take very detailed steps in recording information by writing, drawing, mapping and taking pictures of the site they work at. If these steps aren't taken, valuable information can be lost forever.

Look at the examples of some general broad observations of a site. Try to figure out some conclusions about why this was and what it can tell you about the site.

1. In what was once a room of a building, you find broken dishes and animal bones. In another rooms you find broken tools and metal scraps. What were these room used for? What type of building was this? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. A broken Pepsi bottle suddenly appears three feet down in the midst of 18th century artifacts you're uncovering. What happened at this site? Why was this found here? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. You uncover dozens of clay pipes in a pile, all with broken stems. What does this tell you about what happened here? \_\_\_\_\_

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4. Many pieces of high quality, but broken Chinese porcelain dinnerware and glass stemware is found at Michilimackinac from the 1700s level. What does this tell you about the people of the house? \_\_\_\_\_

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5. You're on a hill and notice a large rectangle on the ground that has a different type of ground cover in the rectangle than all around it. What does this tell you about this spot? \_\_\_\_\_

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6. You find a lead whizzer, clay marbles and a slate pencil in a room of a building. What does this tell you about this room? \_\_\_\_\_

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7. In a field you find a garden hoe from the 1700s, repaired with old musket parts. What does this tell you about the person that lived nearby? What does this tell you about the community he lived in? \_\_\_\_\_

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8. The metal part of a musket and a cap plate from a military hat are found at a site near Mill Creek. What does this tell you about this site? \_\_\_\_\_

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Digging for artifacts is just one phase in the entire process of archaeology. Put the steps of an archaeologist's work in the correct order.

- A. Excavate site
- B. Identify artifacts
- C. Discover site
- D. Write report
- E. Analyze artifact pattern
- F. Establish grid
- G. Take notes
- H. Wash artifacts
- I. Test site
- J. Map site
- K. Re-map site

### In the Future...

...what will people be digging up from your lifetime? What will they learn about you? Think of objects you may throw away and figure out what people can tell about you from those objects.

OBJECT	WHAT THEY WILL LEARN FROM THE OBJECT

