

Trump administration attacks the preservation of archaeological resources

Philip Guelpa
8 June 2025

Budget and staffing cuts being carried out by the Trump administration will have a highly destructive effect on the archaeological record of the United States. These attacks are being carried out directly against federal agencies which have archaeologists on staff, such as the National Park Service (NPS), and through cuts of funds to state-level agencies, including State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPO) and Tribal Historic Preservation Offices (THPO), and indirectly by weakening regulations that have required archaeological investigations prior to federally funded or permitted undertakings, such as highway and energy pipeline projects.

Archaeological sites collectively constitute an irreplaceable store of information about the culture and history of the people who have inhabited what has become this country, beginning with the first migration of people from Asia more than ten thousand years ago, right up to the present. Archaeological data, including both the material remains of past behavior and the spatial contexts in which they were found, provide an independent perspective not available from written records, oral traditions and the like. They represent the physical remains of what people actually did rather than what they thought about what they did. This is true not only of the distant past, before written records, but of the recent past as well.

The archaeological record is fragile and irreplaceable. Each archaeological site is a piece of a grand puzzle. Once a site is destroyed, the information it contained is lost forever. As developments involving ground disturbance (e.g., road building, dam construction, etc.) proceed, a growing number of pieces of the puzzle go missing, making the reconstruction and study of the past increasingly difficult.

During the past six decades, a structure of laws, personnel, and techniques has been constructed that efficiently and effectively protects and preserves a significant sample of the archaeological record that otherwise would be lost forever.

In 1966 the United States government adopted the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was adopted in 1970. Together, these represent the high point in gains made against the ravages of the capitalist system on culture, history, and the natural environment during the post-World War II period. All of this has come under increasing attack in subsequent decades, with an all-out assault now being mounted by the fascist Trump administration.

Section 106 of the NHPA protects archaeological sites and

historic properties, collectively known as cultural resources, which may be impacted by federal actions.

The NHPA established the National Register of Historic Places (aka the National Register) in which cultural resources should be listed if they represented a significant contribution to history or prehistory.

Specifically, the NHPA mandated that any federal action, whether directly undertaken, permitted, or funded, which had the potential to affect cultural resources was to be subjected to investigation to determine whether the action would result in an adverse effect on the qualities which made the resource eligible for listing on the National Register. If the effect was determined to be adverse, various actions were to be considered to mitigate the impact. These actions included avoiding the effect on the resource by project redesign or, if that were not feasible, investigation to recover and preserve the qualities/information that made the resource eligible for listing on the National Register.

Oversight of compliance with provisions of the NHPA was assigned to the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP, aka the Advisory Council). In turn, each state, US territory, and Native American tribal nation was provided funding to assist in establishing a State or Tribal Historic Preservation Office (SHPO or THPO). Over the years, many states and municipalities adopted their own legislation and offices to cover projects that did not have federal involvement, such as the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) in New York City.

In order to carry out the investigations mandated by federal, state and local regulations, known as Cultural Resource Management (CRM), a whole “industry” of consultants, including both within academic institutions and as private firms, emerged. An estimated 90 percent of archeological work in the US is done under the auspices of CRM.

Many thousands of archaeological surveys have been conducted in advance of construction projects, some of which identified archaeological sites which were tested and evaluated. A fraction of these were determined to be National Register-eligible and either bypassed or subject to data recovery investigation if they could not be avoided by the proposed project.

An outstanding example was the identification and excavation of the 18th Century African Burial Ground (ABG) in lower Manhattan, which was the planned location of a federal office building. In that case, all the burials within the footprint of the planned office tower were carefully removed and studied.

Construction of a planned adjacent parking structure where more burials were located was eliminated and the excavated remains from the office tower location ultimately reburied there. Important information about the lives of African Americans living in New York City prior to the American Revolution was acquired which was otherwise unavailable.

Without the NHPA and similar state and local regulations, thousands of important archaeological sites would have been destroyed over the last six decades. Not all such sites are as spectacular as the ABG, but each constitutes an important piece of the overall puzzle. The spatial distribution of various archaeological sites across the landscape, as well as knowledge of where particular types of sites are *not* located, can provide valuable information regarding past patterns of land use, contributing to an understanding of how people adapted to their environments and how those adaptations evolved through time.

Now, that whole regulatory structure, including a wealth of knowledge and expertise of the archaeologists and other specialists involved, and an untold number of sites, are threatened by the capitalist oligarchy which values nothing but filling its pockets and preparing for war.

Critics have claimed that the cost and time involved in archaeological investigations is an unfair burden on project schedules. In fact, in most cases, the cost and time involved is a minor portion of overall project cost and schedule.

As part of his goal to exercise greater control over federal agencies, Trump is acting to cripple the ability of the Advisory Council to oversee the implementation of Section 106 by removing three members of the Council, including its vice chair, leaving it unable to call meetings.

The full impact on archaeological resources and the people who investigate and protect them is yet to be revealed. But the prospects are grim, based on what is already happening to other federal agencies and programs. Already, staffing cuts have hit approximately 250 archaeologists who work for the National Park Service (NPS). For example, 10 of 17 NPS archaeologists have been cut from the southeast regional office. The NPS manages thousands of properties across the country, many of which have known archaeological sites and the potential for many more as yet undiscovered.

Cuts in federal funding to SHPOs and THPOs are resulting in massive staffing reductions. For example, the Ohio SHPO recently announced that it has been forced to lay off a third of its staff, 12 of 36 employees, due to non-payment of about \$1.45 million in federal funds. This will severely impact that office's ability to conduct project reviews, resulting in the loss of an unknown number of historic and archaeological resources.

Not only new funds are being cut. The administration is reneging on existing financial support. For example, a \$350,000 grant to Archaeology Southwest, a Tucson, Arizona-based nonprofit, is being "clawed back."

Not only are new archaeological investigations under threat, existing archaeological collections from previous work are in danger as well. In one action, the Trump administration intends to cut federal funds to museums, many of which have archaeological collections, by eliminating the Institute for Museum and Library

Services.

The broad-scale attack on the sciences in general is already having a chilling effect on the field of archaeology. Many of the papers to be presented at the recent Society for American Archaeology (SAA) conference were withdrawn due to effected or anticipated federal funding cuts or fear that they would draw the ire of the Trump administration due to running afoul of one or another taboo subject such as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), even tangentially. A significant number of federally employed archaeologists who would normally attend were absent.

In addition to moves directly impacting government-funded archaeology, the Trump administration's drive to greatly reduce government regulations regarding the private energy, construction and other industries will inevitably result in a significant increase in ground-disturbing activities without archaeological review, impacting many as yet unrecorded archaeological sites. The US Transportation Department, which is ultimately responsible for a large amount of archaeological work as a consequence of its funding of state DOT projects, is proposing to "streamline" the Section 106 process to severely restrict the ability of SHPO and THPO officials to properly review proposed projects.

There are 227 THPOs charged with protecting historic and archaeological sites within their territories. The proposed 2026 federal budget includes a 94 percent cut in funding for these offices, essentially shutting them down. Funds for 2025 have yet to be distributed. Furthermore, whereas previously THPOs had 30 days to review proposed projects regarding the potential to affect cultural resources, Trump's energy emergency provides for only seven days, an impossibly short deadline.

There are currently an estimated 8,000 working archaeologists in the United States. A large proportion of these jobs is likely to be eliminated by the cumulative impact of the Trump administration's actions.

A 2023 poll conducted by the SAA and Ipsos found that a majority of Americans overwhelmingly value the work of archaeologists and education about archaeology. The poll found that 88 percent of Americans say the work archaeologists do is important and a clear majority support increased protections for the archaeological record.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact