

Cultural Resources

and Your Conservation Plan



What are Cultural Resources?

Our North American cultural heritage spans more than 10,000 years. Much of the story of our past is poorly understood, and it is difficult to piece together. Stories of our past await discovery through careful recording and interpretation of traces of human behaviors. We call these traces cultural resources, and many of these traces are preserved on the surface and in the soils of our farms and cities.

Simply stated, cultural resources are the past activities and accomplishments of people. They include buildings, objects or artifacts, locations, and less tangible resources such as dances, stories, and holiday traditions. Cultural resources are non-renewable. There is no way to “grow” a new archaeological site or historic house after it is destroyed.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) encounters a variety of cultural resources during the conservation planning process. These may include prehistoric or historic archaeological sites, buildings, structures, features, or objects. While structures are easy to identify and avoid, NRCS employees commonly encounter non-structural archaeological sites. These often extend below the soil surface and must be protected when conservation activities may disturb the earth at the site.

Why Does NRCS Care About Cultural Resources?

Resource Conservation.

NRCS protects cultural resources for the same reason it protects 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; protecting and interpreting significant 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.



Stone circle on the south side of the Big Snowy Mountains.

It is the Law

Recognizing the importance of cultural heritage, Congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) in 1966. The NHPA establishes a policy for protecting important cultural resources (also called historic properties). The NHPA requires Federal agencies to consider cultural resources in their activities, and to determine if significant historic properties will be adversely affected by those activities.

Nationally, NRCS has established procedures for training conservation planners and partners to complete limited field reviews and recognize some cultural resources during conservation planning. This helps ensure that cultural resources are protected during earth-disturbing conservation

activities. In addition, the NRCS has Cultural Resources Specialists (CRS) and Cultural Resources Coordinators (CRCs) on staff across the country to help provide additional assistance when cultural resources are encountered.

What Makes a Cultural Resource Significant?

To be considered a significant historic property, cultural resources must meet one of the following four criteria for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP):

- A. Associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the major pattern of American history.
- B. Associated with significant people of the American past.
- C. Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction.
- D. Has yielded or may likely yield information about the history or prehistory of America.

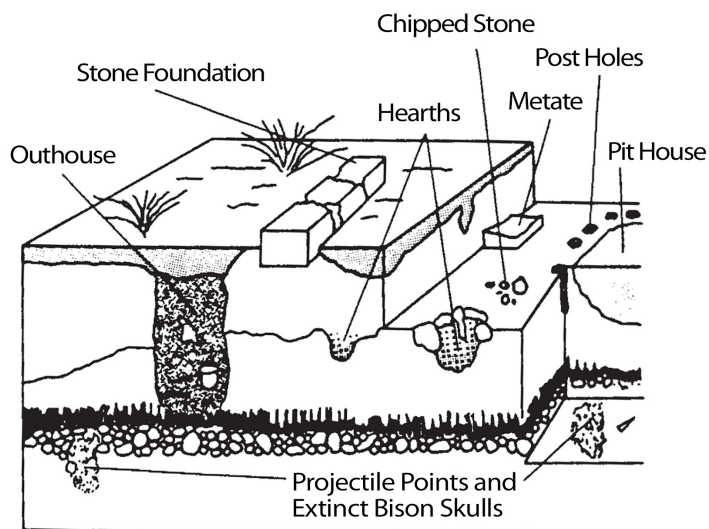
NRCS Procedures for Cultural Resources Protection

The NRCS seeks to identify, evaluate, and avoid the destruction of cultural resources. Projects utilizing NRCS funding to implement an activity in a conservation plan must follow these general cultural resources protection procedures.

Step 1: Decide if proposed conservation activities are earth-disturbing. Activities that involve heavy equipment and extensive earth disturbance have the potential to impact cultural resources.

Step 2: Determine the entire area that will be altered during construction of conservation activities. This can include

Archeological Features



the area where activities are planned, but it can also include additional areas for such activities as equipment staging and material borrowing.

Step 3: Examine the area for evidence of cultural resources. This step will be completed by a trained NRCS conservation planner or partner at no cost to the property owner or applicant. If cultural resources are found, NRCS cultural resources personnel may visit the project site to help determine the total extent of the cultural resource.

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

Step 5: If the cultural resource cannot be avoided, a professional archaeologist or historian will evaluate its significance. In most states, this evaluation will be completed by NRCS cultural resources personnel. Under some circumstances, additional research and investigation may be required. The expense for such additional investigations may be the responsibility of the property owner or applicant, and it cannot typically be supported with cost-share funds.

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 (a historic property), and an alternative practice cannot be agreed upon, the cultural resource must be mitigated. Mitigation is an action that reduces the harmful impact. It may consist of moving a historic structure out of harm's

way or documenting its architecture before destruction, excavating an archaeological site, or building a protective barrier around the historic property. If a landowner does not want to pay for site evaluation or mitigation and no alternative conservation plan can be implemented, NRCS will likely withdraw financial assistance on conservation activities at that location. Landowners always have the option of installing conservation practices at their own expense.

Procedures for Discovery During Construction

If unanticipated artifacts, building foundations, or human remains are uncovered during implementation, stop all work and contact the NRCS. The NRCS will work with the property owner or applicant to take steps that protect the cultural resource until it can be evaluated for significance. Steps 5 and 6 described previously will be conducted.

Private Property Rights and Burial Protection Laws

Landowners with historic properties on their land have ownership of that historic

property with the exception of human remains, grave markers, burial mounds, and artifacts found in association with graves and human remains. Most states have laws that protect human burials and their associated objects. If human remains are encountered during construction, stop all work and contact law enforcement and a county coroner's office immediately.

Non-grave artifacts from archaeological sites and historic buildings are the property of the landowner. Federal assistance or funding cannot be received if cultural resources are intentionally disturbed or removed to avoid compliance with historic preservation laws and policies. If cultural resources are inadvertently discovered or damaged during construction, stop all work and contact the NRCS for further guidance.

Additional Information

If you need more information about Cultural Resources, contact the NRCS at your local USDA Service Center. Listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture or online at <https://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app>.

NRCS cultural resources information is also available online at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/technical/ecoscience/cultural/>.



Sheep herders monument, a cultural resource landmark in Liberty County.

Montana

Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

mt.nrcs.usda.gov

