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# Archaeology at Fort St. Joseph 01: What is Archaeology?

Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project

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# What is Archaeology?

Archaeology is the study of past peoples through the items that they have left behind.

Archaeologists gather information by excavating at archaeological sites.

Archaeologists look for **artifacts**, which are objects that were made and used by people who inhabited the site. They collect animal bones and seeds, or **ecofacts**, that can tell about the foods that people ate. **Features** are also important in archaeology, as these are indications of human activity, such as the foundation of a house or a fireplace. The main tool of archaeology is a trowel, which makes it easy to scrape away dirt when excavating. The soil that is removed is screened to find smaller artifacts. At Fort St. Joseph, wet screening is utilized. This consists of pushing the soil through a mesh screen with water to enable the archaeologist to find items such as gunshot and beads. Once the artifacts and soil have been removed, the site has been forever changed

and an archaeologist's notes are the only record of what was on the site.



As archaeologists dig, detailed notes are kept about what is found and what is seen in the soil. They also make drawings, take photographs and make maps and video tapes to further record their findings.



Field school students use trowels to carefully uncover a fireplace at Fort St. Joseph.



Field school students wet screen dirt to find artifacts.

## What is Historical Archaeology?

Historical archaeology is the study of people and cultures that existed during recorded history. In North America, the historical period begins with the arrival of Europeans. For example, Fort St. Joseph falls within the contact period of the Great Lakes region and is an example of a historical site. Archaeologists are thus able to utilize material (artifacts) and written (documents) evidence to understand these past cultures. These documents may include diaries, journals, maps,

newspapers, meeting minutes or tax records. The practice of historical archaeology requires that archaeologists use methods of archaeology, history and anthropology. The study of Fort St. Joseph is historical archaeology, utilizing artifacts and documents, in conjunction with interdisciplinary methods, to better understand the lives of the inhabitants of this French colonial fort.