

# Building a Career as a State Archaeologist

Since there is no federal legal requirement to fund a position for a State Archaeologist, each U.S. state and territory handles the requirements, roles, and duties of such a position differently. State archaeologists can be embedded within their state or territory's State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) which are mandated by the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). They may also be associated with State Universities or Museum systems, work for a State Historical Society, or many other configurations.

State Archaeologists must possess a varied skillset to draw from and be flexible in how they approach their role. Experiences ranging from academic research, field survey and report writing, grant and budget management, collections management, and public outreach enable them to be successful. Some states not only have State Archaeologists, but also a small support staff of general or specialist archaeologists, curators, underwater archaeologists, or Geographic Information System (GIS) professionals.

## Organizations Employing State Archaeologists

- State Historic Preservation Office
- State Archaeology Office
- State Museums
- Universities
- Departments of Natural/Cultural Resources
- State Historical Societies and Commissions
- Departments of Environmental Quality
- Departments of Transportation



## Job Responsibilities

Although State Archaeologist duties vary widely by state and territory, they often include these tasks:

- Maintain a list or catalog of archaeological sites in the state
- Maintain statewide archaeological collections and associated records (e.g., photographs, maps, field notes, GIS data) and Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) compliance
- Conduct surveys and inventories of archaeological sites in the state
- Nominate sites or facilitate nominations of archaeological resources to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP)
- Consult and engage with Tribal Nations on:
  - ▶ Indigenous sites/Traditional Cultural Properties (TCPs)
  - ▶ Section 106 of the NHPA
  - ▶ National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

- ▶ Discoveries of ancestral remains
- ▶ NAGPRA
- Manage compliance review at the state and/or federal level under Section 106 of the NHPA and NEPA
- Develop state-wide policy on archaeology generally as well as archaeological photography, artifact curation, reporting repositories (digital or traditional), deep testing or geoarchaeology protocols, bioarchaeology, cemeteries, Ancient Submerged Landforms (ASLFs), drone and Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) protocols, and report/style guide requirements, among other policies
- Issue permits for archaeological investigations
- Handle inadvertent discoveries of human remains
- Engage in public education and outreach, public speaking (including statewide celebrations of Archaeology Month which vary by state), local conferences, avocational groups, or coordination with state societies, and publication
- Mentor archaeology students
- Coordinate with Cultural Resource Management (CRM) firms to prepare scopes of work and cost estimates for CRM contract projects
- Act as an advocate or resource to statewide policymakers, state underwater archaeologists, or archaeologists overseeing state park systems
- Review state grant applications and support disbursement of grant funds
- Interface with federal agencies, lawmakers, project developers, permit applicants, grant recipients, public media outlets, and community stakeholders

## Role-specific Skills



- Multitasking
- Oral and written communication skills
- Collaboration skills
- Flexibility in work schedule including willingness to travel across the state
- Well-rounded understanding of the various types of archaeological projects that can occur in terms of methods, research protocols, and the general progression of archaeological research
- Knowledge of state and federal cultural resources laws, regulations, and guidelines
- Practical field experience including survey, subsurface testing, artifact identification (specialty in lithics, ceramics, or faunal remains can be useful), site mapping and documentation, and a basic understanding of geomorphology
- Technological skills, including GIS, Global Positioning System (GPS), geophysics, drone/UAV control, Photoshop, Illustrator, and databases
- Ethnographic training and experience working with communities from various cultural backgrounds
- Comprehensive knowledge of a state or territory's archaeological record and cultural history
- Project management; budgeting; technical writing and editing
- Diplomacy and negotiation skills, and the ability to get along with diverse constituents including politicians, interested members of the public, professional and avocational archaeologists, Indigenous and Native American Tribes (including both federally recognized Tribes and non-recognized Indigenous groups), personnel from federal, state, and municipal agencies, developers, medical examiners and law enforcement, the media, collectors, treasure hunters, and many others

## Training/Education

- State Archaeologist positions require a minimum of a Master's level (MA or MS) degree in anthropology, archaeology, or a related field, although often a PhD is required
- Meeting the Secretary of Interior (SOI) [Qualifications](#) for professional archaeology is required for State Archaeologists in all U.S. states and territories
  - ▶ Fieldwork experience can begin with an archaeological field school while in college, followed by additional experience working as a field technician and field supervisor, if not Principal Investigator
  - ▶ Supervisory experience
  - ▶ Demonstrated ability to see a field project to completion, including laboratory analysis and report writing
- Other Useful Training/Education
  - ▶ [Register of Professional Archaeologists](#) (RPA)
  - ▶ Business certifications
  - ▶ [Project management certifications](#)
  - ▶ [Forensic training](#)



## Selected Elements in Career Preparation

- A wide skill set and substantial knowledge of the state or territory's history into the distant past, including the wider regional archaeological context
- Research and survey experience since you will frequently be asked to advise, if not participate, in these activities
- Knowledge of federal preservation laws and executive orders, as well as a deep familiarity with your state's preservation laws and the State Archaeologist's role under those laws
- Background in collections and data management
- Experience in writing for and speaking to the general public in this public-facing role
- Budgeting and project management
- Other skills (e.g., geospatial data management, stakeholder consultation)

## Career Profile of a State Archaeologist

The career profile of **Dave Williams, Nebraska State Archaeologist**, offers a glimpse into a career leading to a State Archaeologist role.

"I anticipated getting my PhD and becoming an archaeological professor at a university. However, during my MA work, the stark reality of how few jobs in academia existed hit, and a career in CRM seemed more likely. After completing my MA, I spent three years in the private sector, honing my Section 106 skills through a wide variety of energy sector and Federal contract projects across the Great Plains and Midwest. I then returned home to South Dakota for a job as the Contracts Manager at the South Dakota Archaeological Research Center (South Dakota's State Archaeology Office), where I spent over six years managing CRM contracts and field crews, primarily for a Department of Transportation project.

I didn't anticipate becoming a state archaeologist, but when the position opened in Nebraska, I took a chance in applying and was offered the job! Becoming the Nebraska State Archeologist has put all of my career experiences into play, from developing cost estimates and project scopes of work, to tribal consultation through NAGPRA, to engaging with the public in myriad ways, to being a people leader and department head. And while this isn't the career path I anticipated taking when I became interested in archaeology at seven years old, I've enjoyed how challenging, varied, and rewarding the experience has been and wouldn't change a thing!"

### Suggested Courses

- Archaeology field school
- Archaeology methods and theory
- Historic Preservation/CRM regulations and law
- Archaeological ethics
- Cultural anthropology
- Project management
- Geospatial data analysis
- Public education
- Museum studies
- Grant writing and research design
- Museum studies and curation
- Technical drawing and GIS
- Geoarchaeology/Soil Science/Geology/Geomorphology
- Field safety course or field survival skills
- General research skills



### Typical Day Activities for State Archeologists

The day-to-day work of State Archaeologists is guided by the needs of their state.

- Work with their counterparts in SHPOs and federally-recognized Tribal Nations and Tribal Historic Preservation Offices (THPOs); these interactions can range from Section 106 of the NHPA compliance to consultation under NAGPRA
- Oversee state preservation laws, often including the review, permitting, and approval of certain types of archaeological work

- Engage actively in archaeological research across their state
- Oversee state archaeological site files
- Work with both academic researchers and consultants from CRM firms on a variety of projects and assistance requests
- Engage with the public through presentations and other outreach activities, and serving as a point of contact in answering questions.

## Typical Day Profiles of State Archaeologists

### Charles “Chip” McGimsey, Louisiana State Archaeologist and Director

“On a typical day I may participate in consultations with federally-recognized Tribal Nations, federal agencies, and private companies on agreements about how Section 106 projects will be conducted or developing the Scopes of Work that will define the specific archaeological work to be done at a site or project area. I answer telephone calls or emails from the general public about artifacts and sites they have found. I also respond to those looking for information about abandoned cemeteries and the inadvertent discovery of human remains.

Some of my other responsibilities include working with colleagues who maintain the state’s archaeological site records, reviewing proposed projects to determine if a cultural resources survey will be recommended prior to construction, and helping organize collections for permanent storage. On some days, I will make a presentation to a public group or school class on the archaeology of the state or assist colleagues in creating exhibits on the state’s archaeology which will be displayed in museums, libraries and other institutions. Occasionally there are opportunities to visit sites where an excavation is taking place. I may also visit individuals who have artifact collections or know where sites are located so their information can be documented for the state’s records.”



### Sarah Surface-Evans, Michigan Senior Archaeologist

“I’m not sure I can say there is a typical day, as my work overseeing the Archaeology Program in the Michigan SHPO is incredibly varied, but this is also part of the appeal of the job for me. (Michigan does not have a named State Archaeologist.) Much of my work dovetails with other SHPO programs, such as Section 106 review and evaluating and nominating sites to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). As a part of the Section 106 program, I work closely with Tribal Nations and Federal agencies which includes regular consultation meetings, preparing letters documenting consultation, and occasionally, conducting site visits or responding to inadvertent discoveries. I also work with a variety of stakeholders to develop state-level guidelines for archaeological investigations and reporting, and assist with the development of the Statewide Historic Preservation Plan. I review nominations for the NRHP and provide quarterly updates to the State Historic Preservation Review Board.

For the archaeology program, I work with my archaeology colleagues to develop public education programming, including our annual Archaeology Month poster and events. Every year, I visit universities and organizations to give public presentations about Michigan Archaeology. I also conduct trainings on state and federal preservation law for federal, state, and local agencies. Part of my duties include managing our state archaeological site file, which includes nearly 30,000 terrestrial and underwater sites. We receive documentation for roughly 500 new sites and thousands of archaeological surveys every year. Our program also maintains the records for the state collections and ensures NAGPRA compliance. We work with more than 60 federally-recognized tribes related to NAGPRA consultation and repatriation. The consultation work I do for NAGPRA and Section 106 is probably my favorite part of the job. I enjoy working with stakeholders to support preservation and promote archaeological heritage across my state.”



### **Melissa “Mel” Zabecki, Arkansas State Archaeologist**

“I work for the Arkansas Archeological Survey, which is a division of the University of Arkansas System. Consequently, I’m not part of any regulatory agency and not connected with the SHPO. While I don’t make decisions or determinations, all the state and federal agencies still include me in their various conversations about projects. So, I am in the loop but not the decision-maker, which is kind of nice!

I spend a lot of time communicating with stakeholders from all walks of life. As a human remains specialist, I work not only with my fellow Survey coworkers, but anyone in the state who has questions or needs identifications. A typical day can start off with fielding an **email** from a concerned citizen about development plans, taking a **call** from a federal archeologist asking my opinion about a project, answering a **text** from a coworker wondering if a bone is human or not, preparing a **presentation** for a county historical society, jumping on a **Zoom** call with the Executive Director the Arkansas Humanities Council to plan our next Board meeting (I am the Chair of the Board), maybe squeezing in a non-work lunch, dropping an animal into my **dermestid beetle** colony to eventually add to my faunal comparative collection, meeting with the head of the Arkansas Archeological Society to **draft** up a memorandum of agreement with a state agency for our Site Stewards to gain access to sites, reading a coworker’s application or web submission and **providing comments**, visiting with a citizen who comes in asking for **identification** of an object they found (invariably a natural rock), checking **site files** to learn about a site that might be negatively impacted, and many, many more Zoom meetings! My favorite part of my job is getting to know all of the various folks that are committed to preserving my state’s heritage!”

## Dave Williams, Nebraska State Archaeologist

“One of the most enjoyable parts of my job is how atypical my days are! In Nebraska, the [State Archeology Office](#) (SAO) is separate from the SHPO, though both are programs within the Nebraska State Historical Society. Unlike many other state archeology offices, the Nebraska SAO houses an 11-person CRM program, the Highway Archeology Program, which primarily contracts with the Nebraska Department of Transportation to meet Section 106 requirements across the state. Two other SAO staff (including our Curator of Archeological Collections and me), receive state general funds to satisfy duties and responsibilities outlined in the [Nebraska Archaeological Resources Preservation Act](#) and [Nebraska Unmarked Human Burial Sites and Skeletal Remains Protection Act](#). These two pieces of state legislation drive our work.

There is a fair amount of administrative work—reviewing budgets, preparing project scopes of work, attending agency leadership meetings, completing staff evaluations, and the like—but I also have opportunities to meet with members of the public, conduct fieldwork and research, present at conferences, and interact with a wide variety of stakeholders to carry out my statutory obligations. I regularly engage with state, federal, and tribal representatives, as the Nebraska State Archeology Office is the central clearinghouse for all of Nebraska’s archaeological records, collections, and data. Through the state unmarked burials law, we work with nearly 40 federally-recognized tribes to maintain NAGPRA compliance. Public engagement and building relationships with our tribal partners have been the two most rewarding aspects of my job.”

## Applying for State Archaeology Jobs

U.S. states and territories may have job openings when you are conducting a job search.

- Explore job listings 1) through state job or careers listings, often maintained by each state, and 2) professional organizations, such as the [Society for America Archaeology](#), which maintain career websites
- Consider applying for volunteer or internship opportunities within the office of the State Archaeologist while you are getting your degree; benefits include:
  - ▶ Gaining valuable experience and insight into a State Archaeologist career including a broad understanding of cultural resources, historic preservation law, the value of teamwork and allyship for resource protection and preservation, grant writing and management, budgeting, and working with diverse stakeholder groups
  - ▶ Receiving direct hands-on training from the State Archaeologist and their staff
- Review the [National Association of State Archaeologists](#) (NASA) website to learn more about State Archaeologists and their work.

