

Building a Career in Federal Archaeology

Federal archaeology is the work of archaeologists for U.S. federal departments and agencies to consider, care for, protect, and preserve cultural, historic, and archaeological resources on behalf of the American public. Federal archaeology is a part of [Cultural Resource Management](#) (CRM) for federal agencies that permit and license federally-funded projects as well as for those agencies that manage archaeological resources on their lands.

The number of archaeologists was estimated to be over 1,500 as of January 2025; that number was reduced significantly under the Trump administration. Both federal government departments and agencies hire archaeologists in which:

- A department is a high-level executive branch unit, typically part of the President's Cabinet, and composed of multiple agencies
- An agency is a smaller, more specialized unit, which falls under a department and focuses on a specific area of policy or function.

Federal archaeologists are involved in educating department or agency staff and the public about the public benefits of archaeology as well as legal requirements to ensure archaeological sites and history are considered. They engage with national, state, and local organizations to ensure the public has a voice in:

1. How federal projects impact the archaeological record
2. Determining the significance of archaeological sites and preserving them.

Their positions may involve:

- fieldwork
- lab work
- curation and collections management
- interpreting archaeology to the public
- teaching and training
- collaborating with lawmakers, Congress, and Tribal Nations
- creating policy for federal historic preservation programs.



Most federal archaeologists work on interdisciplinary teams which can include:

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| • Anthropologists | • Lawmakers |
| • Other Social Scientists | • Elected Officials |
| • Museum Curators | • Attorneys |
| • Forensic Anthropologists | • Geophysical Specialists |
| • Paleontologists | • Architectural Historians |
| • Biologists | • Historians |
| • Tribal Liaisons and Tribal Monitors | • Historic architects |
| • Editors | • Architects |
| • Public Relations Specialists | • Drone Operators |
| • Park or Forest Rangers | • GIS specialists |
| • Members of Congress | • Mapmakers and Geographers |

- Tribal Nations
- Educators and Training Specialists
- Engineers
- Law Enforcement.

Federal archaeologists help shape public policy and public perception about archaeology and historic preservation. They encourage and promote historic preservation, including archaeology, as a public value. They work with many public and private interest groups that can include:

- Tribal Nations, recognized Tribes, Confederacies, International Tribes
- Native Alaskan Corporations
- Native Hawaiian Organizations
- Tribal Historic Preservation Officers
- Federal Preservation Officers
- State Historic Preservation Officers
- Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
- Other historic preservation organizations
- Applicants for federal licenses, permits, and funds.

They write historic preservation agreements and ensure that historic preservation laws, regulations, executive orders, and policies are followed.

Federal Historic Preservation Law, Regulations, Executive Orders, and Policy

Federal archaeology has been shaped by federal historic preservation law for over 100 years. While much federal archaeology centers around the [National Historic Preservation Act of 1966](#) (NHPA), and a part of that act called [Section 106](#), federal archaeologists often oversee, and are guided by, a range of historic preservation laws, regulations, guidelines, executive orders and policies including:

- Antiquities Act 1906
- NPS Organic Act 1916
- Historic Sites Act 1935
- Federal Property and Administrative Services Act 1949
- National Trust for Historic Preservation 1949
- Reservoir Salvage Act 1960 (See AHPA 1974)
- Archaeological and Historic Preservation Act (formerly the Reservoir Salvage Act) 1974
- National Historic Preservation Act 1966
- Department of Transportation Act Section 4f (1966), 4i (1974)
- National Environmental Policy Act 1969
- Executive Order 11593: Protection and Enhancement of the Cultural Environment 1971
- National Marine Sanctuaries Act 1972
- Coastal Zone Management Act 1972
- Public Buildings Cooperative Use Act 1976
- American Indian Religious Freedom Act 1978
- Archaeological Resources Protection Act 1979
- Abandoned Shipwreck Act 1988
- Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act 1990
- Curation of Federally Owned or Administered Archeological Collections 1990
- National Maritime Heritage Act 1994
- Executive Order 13007: Indian Sacred Sites 1996
- American Battlefield Protection Act 1996
- Executive Order 13006: Locating Federal Facilities on Historic Properties in Our Nation's
- Central Cities 1996
- Save America's Treasures 1998
- Executive Order 13287: Preserve America 2003
- Sunken Military Craft Act 2004

Department or Agency Types

Archaeologists employed in federal land-managing departments or agencies are involved with managing and preserving archaeological properties on their land. They also examine how their department or agency mission, and projects that take place on their lands, might impact those archaeological resources. The [Archaeological Resources Protection Act](#) (ARPA) requires federal land-managing agencies to issue ARPA permits for anyone who seeks to perform archaeological surveys on federal lands.

Archaeologists working in non-land-managing federal departments or agencies must take into account how the projects they license, permit or fund impact archaeological resources on federal, state, tribal, or private properties. Other federal departments or agencies (e.g., [Advisory Council on Historic Preservation](#), [National Park Service](#), [Smithsonian Institution](#)) have specific missions that include understanding, caring for, or preserving archaeological resources and employ federal archaeologists.

Federal Preservation Officers

Section 110 of the NHPA requires each federal agency to have a Federal Preservation Officer (FPO) who oversees the agency's historic preservation program. Many departmental or agency FPOs are archaeologists. The FPO writes departmental or agency historic preservation and archaeological policies and oversees compliance. (A list of FPOs can be found here: <https://www.achp.gov/protecting-historic-properties/fpo-list>.)

Historical Preservation/Archaeology Programs

Federal agencies have national, regional, and local archaeology programs and offices. Other departments or agencies house their programs with environmental programs which ensure adherence to the [National Environmental Policy Act](#) (NEPA) and other environmental laws. Many of those laws consider the human environment, both past and present, in their evaluations of the effects of actions on the environment as a whole. For instance, if the [Federal Highway Administration](#) (FHWA) is providing funding to construct a new road:

- Compliance with NEPA includes consideration of how the road will impact the natural environment, including the human environment (e.g., cutting a wetland area in half, disturbing plant and animal life and a precontact era mound site).
- Compliance with NHPA involves investigating if the path of the road could disturb or destroy important archaeological or other historic or cultural sites.



Many agencies use the information they collect under NHPA analysis to inform the analysis of the impacts to the historic human environment under NEPA.

Variation in Definitions and Descriptions

Archaeologists across the federal government use many definitions, categories, and descriptions to help define the work that they do. This differentiation can be confusing and can have significant impacts on the way:

- archaeological work is done
- applicable laws define how the work can be done
- archaeological expertise is incorporated into larger interdisciplinary studies
- archaeological work is segmented, paid for, and by whom
- the work may impact stakeholders.

For example, many agencies have different definitions of “cultural heritage” (including those that do international work and those that do not use the term at all). Generally, cultural heritage is defined as tangible and intangible evidence of past human activities which may include (or exclude):

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cultural landscapes • cultural knowledge and indigenous traditional knowledge • indigenous ecological knowledge • cultural practices and beliefs • cultural resources • artifacts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • museums • traditional cultural properties • ethnographic resources • monuments • heritage areas • buildings. |
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A similar concept, “historic resources,” focuses on resources considered significant in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, and culture. The [National Register of Historic Places](#) identifies under which criteria they may be significant in NHPA compliance. In contrast to cultural heritage, NHPA defines historic resources as:

- districts
- sites
- buildings
- structures
- objects.



Where have archaeologists found work?

In the past, archaeologists have been hired in such departments and agencies as:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advisory Council on Historic Preservation • Smithsonian Institution • National Park Service • Forest Service • Fish and Wildlife Service • Department of State • Department of Veterans Affairs • Bureau of Land Management • Natural Resources Conservation Service • Rural Utilities Service • Rural Housing Service • Rural Business Service • Bureau of Indian Affairs • Department of Transportation • Federal Highway Administration • Bonneville Power Administration • Bureau of Reclamation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of the Interior • Bureau of Ocean and Energy Management • National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration • National Endowment for the Humanities • Department of Energy • Department of Commerce • Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement • Department of Defense • Department of Homeland Security • Department of Housing and Urban Development • Department of State • Department of the Air Force • Department of the Army • Federal Railroad Administration |
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- Department of the Navy
- Farm Service Agency
- Federal Communications Commission
- National Telecommunications and Information Administration
- Federal Aviation Administration
- Federal Emergency Management Agency
- Presidio Trust
- Tennessee Valley Authority
- United States Army Corps of Engineers
- United States Coast Guard
- United States Marine Corps
- Western Area Power Administration

Finding a Job

The federal government application process is done through the [USA Jobs](#) website, where archaeologists can search for jobs and build resumes. USA Jobs should be the first stop when searching for federal jobs. Archaeologists can also reach out to any federal agency office to direct them to their Federal Preservation Officer, historic preservation staff, or environmental compliance divisions. They will know of job vacancies. It can be helpful to:

- Take courses in historic preservation law, public archaeology, architectural history, and applied anthropology programs because federal archaeologists serve the public and work with many disciplines
- Obtain Secretary of the Interior (SOI) [Qualifications](#) for archaeology and historic preservation since many agencies require an archaeologist to be SOI-qualified or working toward SOI qualifications
- Participate in federal historic preservation law and regulations training through the [Advisory Council on Historic Preservation](#) and the [National Preservation Institute](#)
- Include these courses and trainings on your [USA Jobs](#) resume, your personal resume, your CV, and your cover letter.



Applying for Jobs

The federal job application process through [USA Jobs](#) is unique:

- Federal employers look for your USA Jobs resume *first*; your resume is only supplementary
 - Human Resources sends a “cert” list (i.e., certificate of eligibles) to a hiring manager to choose candidates for interviews
 - Hiring managers look for specific types of information required for the job seeker based on this “cert” list
- Taking a webinar to familiarize yourself with the job application process and talking to federal employees about it are beneficial
- Job announcements include:
 - An opening and closing date after which USA jobs will not accept any more applications
 - Contact information for the federal HR specialist who listed the job—a person who can answer questions about the application process and timelines.

Creating an account on USA Jobs typically involves:

- Following the website prompts through the resume building process which includes the information needed for you to make a cert (information which may not be on your personal resume or CV)
- Completing a questionnaire pertaining to your eligibility related to the type of work that the agency does and the type of archaeological work that would be required; for instance,
 - a questionnaire for an archaeologist applying to the [Rural Utilities Service](#) might ask if you are familiar with surveying long, linear projects and with Section 106 of the NHPA
 - a questionnaire for the [U.S. Forest Service](#) might ask if you are familiar with agroforestry related archaeology or working with Tribal Nations who have inholdings (i.e., privately-owned lands and protected areas) on federal lands.

Other Career Features: Benefits, Series, and Ladders

Working for the federal government has many benefits, including an array of health insurance, work schedules, and leave options. Once a federal employee, archaeologists can apply for other federal jobs that are only open to other federal employees.

Federal jobs are categorized by “series.” Archeologists are most often in the GS-0193 series, but can be hired under other series.

Agencies often have “ladders,” or ways in which students can apply for jobs at the undergraduate and graduate levels and move up to higher positions within the department or agency.

- Each step of the ladder may require higher levels of education and experience, including being SOI-qualified
- A field school and bachelor’s degree in anthropology or related field is a basic requirement for most jobs
- Many agencies also have seasonal, temporary, and term positions that have a beginning and end date for employment.

Pathways Program

Archaeologists who are close to graduating and/or who are in the initial stages of their careers may be hired through the [Pathways Program](#) (authorized by the President through Executive Order [E.O. 13562]). Archaeologists who successfully complete the program may be eligible for noncompetitive conversion to a term or permanent job in the federal civil service. The three Pathways Programs include internships, recent graduates, and presidential management fellows.

The federal government also hires students and recent graduates as interns through other organizations. While these positions are not federal jobs, they can lead to federal jobs. Organizations such as the [National Council for Preservation Education](#) (NCPE) and the [National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers](#) (NCSHPO) facilitate such internships and may advertise these opportunities on their websites.

Many agencies hire archaeologists through [Cooperative Ecosystem Study Unit Agreements](#) (CESU's). The CESU is a national consortium of federal and non-federal partners that support informed natural and cultural heritage stewardship and facilitate collaboration and expertise across various disciplines and institutions. While not federal jobs, they give students experience working with federal agencies which can be included on resumes and applications. Colleges and universities often use CESU agreements for internships for their archaeology students. If your college or university does not have a CESU agreement, it is possible to establish one.

Government Job Series for Archaeologists

These two series can be used as search terms in [USA Jobs](#). Note that the spelling of archaeology is "archeology" in some federal job announcements and titles. It is best to search under both spellings or by job series code "0193":

GS Series:

0193 Archeology Series
0101 Social Science Series
0170 History Series
0190 General Anthropology Series
0199 Social Science Student Trainee Series
1010 Exhibits Specialist (restoration)
1015 Museum Curator Series
1016 Museum Specialist and Technician Series



WG Series:

4701 Preservationist

References and Organizations

Federal agencies usually have their own websites on cultural resource management. A web search using the name of the agency or department and the following terms may be beneficial when looking for jobs and researching an agency:

- National Historic Preservation Act
- National Environmental Policy Act
- archeology or archaeology
- archaeological technician
- ethnography
- culture
- sites
- historic sites
- cultural heritage
- cultural resource specialist
- federal preservation
- tribal preservation
- National Register of Historic Places
- National Historic Landmarks
- architectural history
- historic architect
- museums
- museum technician
- collections
- exhibits specialist
- Tribes
- federally recognized Tribes
- traditional knowledge
- historic or ethnographic landscapes
- historic buildings
- shipwrecks
- underwater heritage
- historical archaeology
- precontact archaeology
- Section 106.

Advisory Council on Historic Preservation

<https://www.achp.gov/>

Cooperative Ecosystem Study Units

<http://www.cesu.psu.edu/>

Federal Historic Preservation Laws <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/historicpreservation/upload/NPS-FHPL-book-revised-final-online-3.pdf>

List of Federal Preservation Officers

<https://www.achp.gov/protecting-historic-properties/fpo-list>

National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers

<https://www.nathpo.org/>

National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers

<https://ncshpo.org/>

National Council for Preservation Education

<https://www.ncpe.us/>

National Preservation Institute

<https://www.npi.org/>

National Trust for Historic Preservation

<https://savingplaces.org/>

Office of Personnel Management General Schedule Positions

<https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/classification-qualifications/classifying-general-schedule-positions/occupationalhandbook.pdf>

Office of Personnel Management Handbook of Occupational Groups and Families

<https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/classification-qualifications/classifying-general-schedule-positions/occupationalhandbook.pdf>

Pathways Program

<https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/hiring-information/students-recent-graduates/>

Secretary of the Interior Professional Qualifications

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/sec-standards-prof-quals.htm>

USA Jobs

<https://www.usajobs.gov/>