

Parkwide archeological survey, 1985

The National Park Service contracted with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) to complete a comprehensive survey of archeological resources at Homestead in 1985. During this survey, led by Dr. Peter Bleed and Chris Schoen, a large Native American site from centuries before the homestead era was discovered. Artifacts found, including several stone tools and shell-tempered pottery, suggest that the area was used during different time periods from over 1,000 years ago to about 500 years ago.

The UNL crew also identified many historic artifacts associated with the Freemans and others.



Left: Star brand toy cap pistol, which dates to 1878, found near the site of the Freeman brick house.
NPS photo

Below: Photo of Daniel and Agnes Freeman with their daughter and grandchildren in front of the brick house (ca. 1906).
NPS photo collection



An archeologist records the location of a burned feature at Homestead National Historical Park.
NPS photo

How do archeologists study the past?

Archeologists research history by studying places where people lived and worked in the past. An important part of this process is recording how and where artifacts were found. Archeological context (the association of artifacts with each other and within soil layers) is vital for understanding the stories of the past.

Once an artifact is removed from its context, information about its story is lost. Archeologists preserve this information through maps, photographs, and detailed notes. Museum specialists care for these records along with the artifacts so researchers in the future can continue to learn about the past.

What if I find an artifact in Homestead National Historical Park?

Public lands are protected by laws to ensure the preservation of archeological sites for public benefit, now and into the future. If you find an artifact, leave it in place and:



Photograph it. Record its location. Tell a Ranger.

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Midwest Archeological Center



Archeology at Homestead National Historical Park



Staff from the Midwest Archeological Center sift through excavated soil to look for artifacts. Archeology helps tell the unwritten stories of the past through the artifacts people left behind.
NPS photo

Smithsonian archeologists work at Homestead, 1948

A little over a decade after Congress established Homestead as a national monument, J. Joseph Bauxar of the Smithsonian Institution's River Basin Survey (Missouri Basin Project) conducted the first formal archeological excavations in the park, focusing on the Freeman Homestead to understand more about pioneer life.

Importantly, Bauxar found two adjacent cabin floors, confirmed to be Daniel Freeman's cabin from 1867-1876 and the Suiter cabin (occupied at about the same time by John Suiter, Freeman's brother-in-law).



Excavations at the Freeman Cabin site in 1948. The Suiter Cabin floor is in the right of the photo with the Freeman cabin floor visible on the left. *NPS photo collection*

The Smithsonian crew also excavated and confirmed the site of the Freeman brick house (built in 1876 and destroyed by fire in 1916). Other exploratory work took place to identify the "Squatters Cabin," a building already extant on the land in 1865, which Freeman first occupied before constructing a more substantial cabin, and the site of a kiln constructed by one of the Freemans to fire the bricks used to build the family's brick house. These last two sites were not conclusively identified.

Investigations at the Freeman School



The Freeman School as it appears today. *NPS photo*

The Freeman School site (built in 1872 and used continuously until 1967) has also been the focus of several small archeological investigations beginning in the 1980s and continuing into this century. Archeologists have found evidence of different construction episodes and renovations to the school over time.

Several more personal items found at the school site, such as the cologne or aftershave bottle shown below, attest to the importance of the school as a center for social activity for many



Left and above: Cologne or aftershave bottle found during excavations at Freeman School. The Anchor-Hocking Glass Corporation in Lancaster, Ohio used the maker's mark found on this bottle after 1938. *NPS photos*

Recent geophysical survey and excavation

In 2019, the Midwest Archeological Center (an office of the National Park Service in Lincoln, Nebraska) completed a geophysical survey of the Native American site identified in 1985 using a magnetic gradiometer. This instrument helps archeologists "see" beneath the ground surface by measuring the effect that buried features, like burned or disturbed soils, have on Earth's magnetic field.



SENSYS magnetic gradiometer array towed by a UTV. A GPS base station is in the foreground. *NPS photo*

Although the results of the magnetic survey did not find any patterned features associated with a village site, archeologists excavated several test units in 2019 and 2021 over magnetic features that could have been associated with buried storage or fire pits. Unfortunately, very few Native American artifacts were found, so many questions about the site remain, including who produced the pottery shown here.



Broken pieces of Native American pottery found at Homestead in 1985. Archeologists reinvestigated the site in 2019 and 2021. *NPS photo*