Finders, keepers?

Think again...

David T. Palmer, Ph.D., state archaeologist talks about the importance of small finds and the legalities involved if a private person finds an artifact.

Expert lays down the law on home archaeology

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The pyramids of Egypt. The Mayan ruins of Central America. The ancient city of Pompeii. These are some of the images that are conjured up when the word, "archaeology," is mentioned.

But there are other, less well-known archaeological sites around the world. They include construction sites, river banks, pipelines and just about anybody's back yard.

Artifacts can be found anywhere people have lived. "Typically, what people will find are pottery shards, whether they're really old — pre-Columbian — or later, from farmsteads or later sites," said David Palmer, regional archaeologist for southwest Louisiana. Palmer has an office at UL, which hosts the Southwest Regional Archaeology Program.

"People will also find projectile points — a lot of times, they're called arrowheads, but sometimes, they were used for spears or darts."

Remnants of dugout canoes are also found occasionally, he added.

Although many artifacts are thousands of years old, it's not a requirement. The line between an antique and an artifact can be somewhat blurred — an object must be a minimum of only 50 years old.

More information

For more on Louisiana archaeology, visit www.crt.state.la.us/archaeology

/ everyday archaeology.

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years old to be classified as an artifact, depending on what the item is.

The most likely people to find artifacts are farmers, hunters, fishermen and construction workers. But just about anyone could stumble across a small piece of local history.

So if you do find something that may have historical significance, what should you do?

There are laws governing the acquisition and sale of genuine artifacts — and they vary a little from state to state.

Ryan Seideman, a lawyer and archaeologist, is the person in Louisiana whose job it is to determine if private citizens have a right to any artifacts in their possession.

Seideman is also the section chief of the state’s Lands and Natural Resources section for the Louisiana Department of Justice.

Some of the laws are clear-cut — like the one governing human remains.

Finding human remains is a more common occurrence than you might think. It happens often enough that Seideman recently gave a talk at UL titled A Nonlegal Guide to Louisiana Archaeology Laws or What Not to Do If You Find a Skull in the Attic.

“It’s very common,” Seideman said. “You find, all over the state, isolated and abandoned family cemeteries.”

The first thing to do, if such a discovery is made, is to call the police.

“The coroner is called out and decides if there is evidence of a crime or if it’s something more in our realm,” Seideman said.

It is illegal in Louisiana to purchase human remains, although the buyer is seldom prosecuted if it is an isolated offense. Seideman said such purchases have been made online.

“The primary objective of archaeology is to preserve the resource, not to punish people,” Seideman said. “On a few occasions, we’ve had to send investigators to recover things. It’s enough of a shock to have the authorities come banging on your door and say that you’ve transacted something illegal online. They won’t do that again.”

Another clear-cut example is any artifact found on state or federal land, such as public parks, Seideman said.

But here is where the law governing artifacts and ethics are sometimes at odds. Picking up artifacts without the guidance of an archaeologist could mean losing important historical information.

“When things are taken out of their context — the location where they were deposited — and the location is not recorded, we will lose the location,” Palmer said. “You may have the artifact, but not the other information associated with it — how old the site is, what it was doing there.”

These are shards of glass and pottery that might be found at a typical excavation.

“It’s not hard to find archaeological sites on state land,” Seideman said. “It’s a crime to remove artifacts of any kind — not just Native American artifacts.”

That would include bottles, pottery, dishes and other objects.

Finding artifacts on private property is another matter. Property owners may keep anything found on their own land.

Anyone who finds something on another person’s property may also keep it, but only with the land owner’s permission.