

THE LONG VIEW OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA: MAKING IT ALL WORK TOGETHER

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One of the most important concepts to understand about archaeology is the value of information over artifacts. We learn about the past by studying not only objects, but their position in space relative to each other and the landscape, as well as their quantities and distribution on one site or across many.

All of this data is what makes up archaeological records. Archaeological records can be field notebooks with quick observations, detailed maps and measurements made on paper, photographs, sound recordings, digital data collected from surveying equipment and GPS units, databases with detailed descriptions of individual artifacts, the raw data and results of specialized laboratory analysis, the list goes on and on. It's a lot of material, and without it, boxes of artifacts do us very little good toward understanding the human past.

Many of these archaeological excavations have been written up into publications and organized reports, summarizing this information and interpreting the sites' uses and significance. But even great reports are written within constraints and to achieve specific objectives. As years pass between excavation and interpretation, being able to revisit the original data and records is key.



Creating an inventory of archaeological records collections at the Virginia Dept. of Historic Resources

In Virginia at the [Department of Historic Resources](#), we have information on about 44,000 recorded archaeological sites. We curate artifacts and records from roughly 10,000 of them. As part of an ongoing effort to move from a purely paper-based organizational system to databases and digitized media, we've been hard at work taking stock of what we have.

For most of our agency's 50- year history, information and records have been organized in paper files, in boxes and folders, on shelves. Although the agency was a fairly early adopter of relational databases and online applications, not all data has yet made it to the digital age. Until now, our physical collections were tracked using a mostly narrative descriptive finding aid, not integrated with any truly relational databases. Our records were well organized alphabetically on shelves by county. In a time when we had an approachable amount of material and researchers physically came to the building to find information, this worked very well. But times have changed. We need to maximize every inch of storage available.



Storage. “FN” on boxes indicates IDs for field notes/records.

Hollinger boxes. We divided material into collections (or “items”), and described the contents of each by media, theme, and archaeological site number. Due to time constraints for this project and technological limitations, we wanted to set things up to be very flexible. So we created custom forms using [KoBoToolbox](#) that could be used from any computer or mobile device, regardless of internet connection. This helped keep the project on track and kept our data nice and clean. We avoided mistakes that are frequently introduced by using a spreadsheet application like Excel and we could sync our work easily, even with unpredictable access to organizational laptops and internet.

From here, we can integrate an incredible amount of information about sites and artifacts into a truly relational database. Doing this will allow us to tackle our physical storage concerns. It will also enable us to prioritize important digitization projects. It will help us preserve materials and data. And it will increase discoverability and accessibility of this truly vast and remarkable body of knowledge.

Researchers can get almost everything accomplished online, except information about artifacts and records.

Last year’s significant project was to perform a comprehensive inventory of the thousands of boxes on our shelves, give them each a unique ID and describe them by listing archaeological site numbers contained within and information about excavations. With the help of a crack team of inventory assistants, we pulled it off. Andrew Foster, one of our original assistants, was able to stay on staff and continue to integrate information into the new format.

This year’s herculean effort has been to do the same for archaeological records. We (rather, Inventory assistant Jennifer Saunders) painstakingly sorted and described records in 220

Field Notes Inventory

* Box ID

Recordset ID

* Recordset Name

* Year

* Organization

* Type(s) of records

- Field Notes
- Large format drawings/maps
- Artifact catalog
- Lab analysis
- Photographic media
- Research materials
- Correspondence
- Digital media (REMOVED)
- Bound CRM reports (REMOVED)
- Other (describe below)

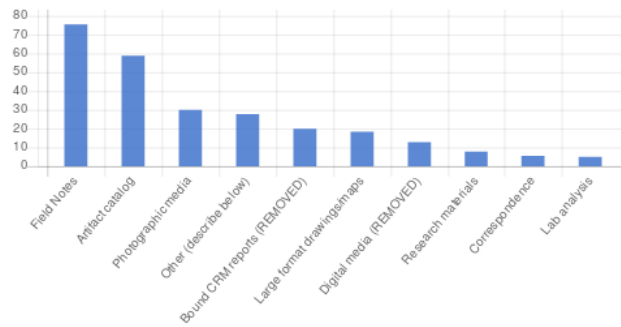
* Associated Site Numbers/DHR IDs (44AA0001, separate with comma)

An easy-to-use form in KoBoToolbox

We're already planning projects for next year and beyond, with the goal of getting information online and encouraging data reuse by researchers and archaeologists, as well as easy exploration of Virginia archaeology by the public. Stay tuned for great things.

Type(s) of records

TYPE: "SELECT_MULTIPLE". 173 out of 173 respondents answered this question. (0 were without data.)



A snapshot of types of records from early in the project.



A box containing excavation notebooks and records from the 1960s C.G. Holland collection. Records arrive in various conditions, some well-arranged, some in unconventional (shoebox) storage.

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