

Think you found an archaeological relic? Here's what to do

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John Worth / UWF Archaeology Institute

A pottery fragment from the Luna Settlement

While swimming in the waters off Pensacola Beach last month, a couple found a historic-looking saber sword not far from the shore. Their finding went viral online, with many questioning if the sword is authentic or a replica.

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According to archeological records, people have lived in the state of Florida for over

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experts say for artifacts discovered by the public, there's an important process to be followed for reporting and determining their historical significance.

"In the case of the saber that they found, whether it was an authentic artifact or a replica, that was outstanding," said Nicole Grinnan, interim executive director and public archeologist for the Florida Public Archeology Network. "It's not typical that we find something that is that intact and so close to shore in a place where there are a lot of people, usually those things have either corroded or gone away over time. We get contacted pretty often by people who have stumbled across something, it's a good opportunity for us to identify what they might have, tell them a little about the history of the area, and increase awareness about archaeological resources we have locally."



South Santa Rosa News
about 2 months ago



MAN FINDS SWORD AT PENSACOLA BEACH: According to Patty Sacco, her husband was in the Gulf of Mexico at Pensacola Beach when it was discovered. "We want to get it looked at and appraised before trying to clean it up so we don't break it if it's an actual historical artifact," state Sacco in a social media post in which she shared this photo.

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The most important thing that archeologists stress to people who believe they have found an object of archeological or historical significance is to leave the item undisturbed and in place. **If possible, photograph and record the GPS coordinates of the item, especially if found on federal or state land. Then, report the finding to the land manager or the [Florida Public Archeology Network](#).**

"The reason why we encourage people to leave things in place and to take a photograph is for archeologists and researchers," Grinnan said. "The value of these things and the information that we gain from them comes from what we call context, or their location in the ground and their relationship to other objects that may be around. Once we remove those objects from the ground, we lose that context. The individual pieces are parts of a bigger puzzle of the past."

Once an artifact is reported on state land, the land manager will investigate to determine if the object is part of an already-known archeological site or a new, unknown site. If artifacts are recovered from the site by archeologists, they are sent to the state collections facility within the [Bureau of Archeological Research](#) in Tallahassee, where further investigation is conducted.

While historic objects found on state and federal land are protected, the opposite can be said about those found on private property. With the exception of human burials and remains, artifacts found on private property belong to the property owner. Even so, archeologists suggest that property owners report the finding to a local archeological network and treat it as if it was found on state or federal land.



John Worth / UWF Archaeology Institute

A jar from the Luna Settlement

“A good example of private property owners working with archeologists is the [Luna Settlement](#) site,” said Mike Thomin, museum manager at the Florida Public Archeology Network. “The reason why that site was discovered is because a local person came across some artifacts that he thought were pretty old and he reported it to the [University of West Florida]. The university was able to then get in contact with the land owners and have given us a whole new window into the entire Tristan de Luna settlement.”

Located within a neighborhood in Pensacola, the site, established in 1559, is the earliest multi-year European colonial settlement ever archaeologically identified in the United States. Numerous sherds of broken 16th-century Spanish ceramics were found

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state collections facility and are now on loan at the [Destination Archaeology Resource Center](#), the [Archaeology Institute](#) and the [Pensacola Museum of History](#).

“All these artifacts that are found are preserved in perpetuity by the state of Florida,” Thomin said. “They allow researchers to access those collections so they can do brand new research, and they also have a great loan program where they loan out artifacts to museums all across the country.”

When it comes to archeological findings, context is everything. Although humans have a tendency to collect objects that fascinate them, doing so with historic relics found in the open can be damaging, both to archeological sites and history in general.

“It can cause a lot of damage and it’s not saving history at all, it’s actually destroying history in many ways,” Thomin said. “Archaeology is a very destructive science, once a site is excavated, all that information is destroyed forever. That’s why archaeologists always try to record every single thing that they find because they know that once it’s excavated, they can never put it back as it was originally found.”

“These tangible forms of the past are a part of a collective story that we all have, and when someone removes something, that’s information lost,” Grinnan added. “Our hope is that people realize that these things belong to our shared history, these artifacts and tangible remains belong in places where everyone can view and enjoy them.”

For more information about the Florida Public Archeology Network’s northwest region, [click here](#).

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Hunter Morrison

Hunter joined WUWF in 2021 as a student reporter.

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