



**An archeologist records thousand-year-old layers in Ash Hollow Cave in 1939. Dark basin-shaped stains in the wall are fireplaces.**



# Archeology in Nebraska's State Parks

BY JOHN R. BOZELL

**T**he Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is celebrating its centennial in 2021.<sup>1</sup> Over the century, Game and Parks has built a marvelous assortment of state parks, recreation areas, and wildlife management tracts. While the focus is outdoor recreation, many of these contain important archeological sites. Some have even been specifically developed as state *historical* parks due their well-preserved and significant archeological resources.<sup>2</sup> Having these irreplaceable archeological sites in public ownership ensures their long-term preservation for both public enjoyment and ongoing archeological research. History Nebraska and the Game and Parks Commission have enjoyed an extensive collaborative history in the interpretation and preservation of these sites.

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*Editor's note: This is the first of a regular series of brief articles exploring Nebraska archeology. The state's archeologists publish their research in technical journals mostly read by other professionals. We won't try to duplicate that level of detail here. Rather, we want to give readers a better idea of how archeology is enhancing our understanding of Nebraska history.*

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Excavating a barracks at Fort Robinson.



An excavation uncovered the foundation and early plumbing features of a Fort Robinson barracks.

### Forts

State Historical Parks have been developed at several military sites: Fort Atkinson (1820-1827), Fort Robinson (1874-1948), Fort Kearny (1848-1871), and Fort Hartsuff (1874-1881). These installations are key to understanding Nebraska's role during American West early exploration and trails, the Indian War period, and World War II. History Nebraska has conducted extensive archeological excavations in portions of these forts from the late 1950s through the present.<sup>3</sup> The investigations have figured prominently in developing highly accurate building reconstructions. While some old maps and grainy historic photographs may exist, the archeological excavations have been able to pinpoint exact building footprints and corners, construction materials, functions of specific rooms, and locations of doors, windows

and interior walls. Artifacts and animal bones recovered during the excavations have provided important clues to a sharper understanding of daily life and diet at these frontier posts.

Archeological investigations at the forts have been enhanced through the use of geophysical techniques such as ground penetrating radar and magnetometer to locate these buried building ruins no longer visible on the surface. In fact, the geophysical work done in Nebraska state parks in the 1970s and early 1980s was under the direction of Dr. John Weymouth of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Physics Department. Weymouth's research in the parks was pioneering and laid the foundation for archeological geophysics that has become common in investigations across the nation.



The site of the old Fort Robinson guardhouse was excavated in the 1960s...

...allowing an accurate replica of the guardhouse to be built on the exact location. The stone marker commemorates the fatal stabbing of Lakota war leader Crazy Horse near the guardhouse doorway in 1877.

The 1820s stockade and buildings of Fort Atkinson were long gone by the 1960s, but archeological excavations uncovered their footprints.



The fort was then reconstructed on site and is now a state historical park.



## Emigrant Trail Sites

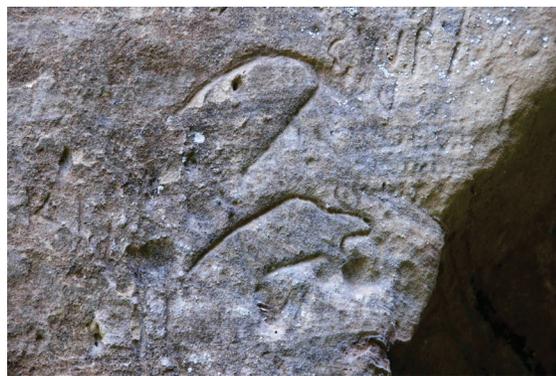
A major hallmark of Nebraska history is our network of mid-1800s emigrant trails and associated stage stations and road ranches. Wonderful exhibits can be found at the Chimney Rock Museum administered by History Nebraska and the National Park Service's Scotts Bluff National Monument. Game and Parks also has developed Ash Hollow State Park and Windlass Hill, which feature some of the most visible trail ruts in the state. Interpretation of trail life is also

featured at Rock Creek Station State Historical Park in Jefferson County in the Blue River valley. The ranch was in operation from 1857 to 1867 and during that time served as a stopover for Oregon Trail travelers as well as a Pony Express station. The long decayed log ranch buildings have been reconstructed on the basis of careful archeological excavation to identify their precise location and construction style.<sup>4</sup> History Nebraska archeological teams have also mapped the network of trail ruts and ancient Native American camps in the park.

**Right: Southeast of Fairbury, Rock Creek Station was a stage and Pony Express station that became notorious for a fatal 1861 shooting involving Wild Bill Hickok.**

**Below: Building reconstructions at Rock Creek Station were based on archeological work and historic photos.**





**This rock shelter in Indian Cave State Park retains petroglyphs carved into the soft sandstone by Indigenous artists centuries before contact with Euroamericans.** Photos courtesy of *NEBRASKAland Magazine*.

### **Native American Sites**

Indigenous Americans have lived in Nebraska for over 13,000 years and camps and burial grounds are preserved in state parks. As parks are developed, History Nebraska archeologists are called in to inspect planned construction zones to identify native sites so they can be avoided. The best example is a prominent mound in Eugene T. Mahoney State Park that contains human remains and grave offerings that are at least eight centuries old.<sup>5</sup> The area was preserved through park access road and cabin location redesign.

Some historic parks serve to interpret ancient Indigenous history, such as Indian Cave and Ash Hollow. Ash Hollow Cave was excavated by History Nebraska in 1939 and is within the state park.<sup>6</sup> The cave contains the stratified layers of multiple camps dating from over two thousand years ago to the 1600s. The investigation in part laid the groundwork for establishing the sequence of pre-Euroamerican contact Native groups living in western Nebraska. A building was constructed over the excavations when the park was developed and visitors can walk down into the cave and see many of the recovered artifacts. 

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See [parks100.outdoornebraska.gov](https://parks100.outdoornebraska.gov) to learn more.

<sup>2</sup> See *Adventures in History: Discovering Nebraska's State Historical Parks*, which aired on Nebraska Public Media on May 23, 2021 ([nebraskapublicmedia.org](https://nebraskapublicmedia.org)).

<sup>3</sup> See Carlson, Gayle F. (1971) *Archeological Investigation at Fort Atkinson (25WN9), Washington County, Nebraska, 1956-1971*, Nebraska State Historical Society Publications in Anthropology 8; (1997) *Archeological Surveying, Testing, and Remote Sensing at Fort Atkinson*, on file Nebraska State Archeology Office, History Nebraska; (1999) *The Cheyenne Outbreak Barracks*, Explore Nebraska Archeology No. 4.; and (2001) *The Archeology of an 1887 Adobe Barracks (25DW51-B56) at Fort Robinson, Nebraska*, on file Nebraska State Archeology Office, History Nebraska.

<sup>4</sup> See Carlson, Gayle F. (1980) *A Preliminary Report on the Results of the 1980 Archeological Investigations at Rock Creek Station State Historical Park, Nebraska* and (1982) *The 1981 Archeological Investigations at Rock Creek Station State Historical Park, Nebraska: A Preliminary Report on the Results of the Second Season of Excavations*. Both reports are on file Nebraska State Archeology Office, History Nebraska.

<sup>5</sup> See Bozell, John R. (1985) *Cultural Resource Investigation of the Eugene T. Mahoney State Park Recreation Roads, Cass County, Nebraska*, on file Nebraska State Archeology Office, History Nebraska.

<sup>6</sup> See Champe, John L. (1946) *Ash Hollow Cave: A Study of Stratigraphic Sequence in the Central Great Plains*. University of Nebraska Studies, New Series 1. Lincoln.

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