

MONTANA STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

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APPLYING SITE NUMBERS TO CULTURAL RESOURCES

Good planning requires not only good information but also good access to that information. As in many other states, the Cultural Resource Information System (CRIS) maintained at the SHPO organizes cultural resource information and access to it by Smithsonian site number or trinomial. How we apply these numbers to cultural resources, therefore, is fundamental to how and how well we can retrieve and use information about cultural resources in our survey and planning efforts. This PLANNING bulletin provides discussion and guidelines for the application of site numbers to cultural resources in Montana.

Site Numbers vs. sites

What is a site? Despite being one of the most commonly used terms in our professions, the definition of a “site” is easily one of the most problematic. It is, on the one hand, everything and anything associated with a given location of human behavior -“an accumulation of materials that are the residues of cultural activity” (Hester, Heizer, and Graham 1975:283). On the other hand, it is nothing -an analytical construct or artificial structuring of reality - if we adhere to the tenets of non-site archaeology or other landscape approaches to human activity. As cultural resources have grown to encompass more and varied things, the concept of site has become even more vague and nebulous.

In considering the application of site numbers, the discussion frequently dissolves into one of defining a site itself. To some extent this is impossible to avoid. At the same time, applying numbers to identify cultural resources and their locations can be dealt with as a separate issue. Identification numbers, if applied systematically, simply provide consistent access to information about recorded things. Removing the “site” from site numbers leaves us to decide what kinds of things we are recording should get unique identification numbers, rather than what kinds of things are sites or not.

While this may not be the purpose for which the Smithsonian trinomial site numbering system we use in Montana was designed, it is the function for which most of us currently use it. We believe that rather than creating a new numbering system at this late date, we are obligated and can operate within the existing system.

Why a Number?

Our general feeling about applying a Smithsonian trinomial to some material cultural manifestation is that if it helps us all relocate the manifestation or the records about it, then it's working. Typically, we find ourselves asking or being asked if any cultural resources are recorded in such and such an area. We answer this query by getting a listing from the Cultural Resource Information System (CRIS) of all the Smithsonian numbered things in a particular legal location. If it doesn't have a Smithsonian number or if its location is not recorded as part of something that does have a number, then for all intents and purposes it isn't there for us to see. And if it "isn't there" then we will not be in a position to give it further consideration or, in the world of compliance, further possible protection. None of us can be expected to reread or remember inventory reports and conversations to know what was recorded that doesn't have a trinomial. As a statewide database, we also should not have to work with more than one numbering system or have to contact more than one source about recorded cultural resource information.

Numbers, therefore, are meant to assist us in organizing and accessing the data we have on cultural resources. They do not imply judgments about the value of the cultural resources, although we will continue to have to make decisions about what records should be assigned a number.

When to Apply Numbers?

Our approach to applying numbers to cultural resources is a pragmatic one. We see it not as question of right vs. wrong but useful vs. less useful.

We don't feel that numbers should be reserved for things that are big or things that we like. At the same

time, for practical reasons, we feel the following things generally and categorically do not require Smithsonian trinomials:

1. Cultural resources that are not over fifty years of age;
2. Cultural resources without definable locations; and
3. Individual artifacts or objects that make up part of a larger recorded and numbered cultural resource.

This does not mean that a number could not be requested for any of the above or that these things could not be described as part of something that does have an assigned trinomial.

We consider situations not covered by the above to have the potential for an assigned number. Most of these many situations present few theoretical or methodological difficulties that a professional background and a consideration of why we apply numbers cannot resolve. There are, however, several recurring instances that are seemingly less clear and more controversial. A more consistent, albeit still flexible, approach has been called for. We address four such situations now.

Isolated Finds/Isolated Feature - These terms were generally defined for prehistoric archaeological settings but have their application to historic and historic archaeological settings as well. The key term is "isolated" i.e. these things are not being recorded as part of a larger cultural resource location to which we are applying a Smithsonian trinomial. Three common situations are: 1) single artifacts; 2) single features; and 3) "minimal activity loci".

Single artifacts - We believe single isolated finds or objects warrant site numbers only in exceptional circumstances. Examples of isolated objects that we would like to access through the state numbering system include culturally scarred trees, historic statuary, monuments, and perhaps certain kinds of permanently abandoned historic machinery. These are "objects" in the sense that the National Register staff uses the term to define a class of cultural resources that may not be eligible for listing. It may also be appropriate to request trinomials for exceptional or very rare isolated single artifacts (e.g. a Clovis point), in order to better store information on these finds and access information about their distribution.

Single features - Different researchers are currently treating isolated features differently. Some isolated features regularly do receive their own number -for example, a pictograph panel, a single tipi-ring, or a historic dump -while others do not -(e.g. isolated historic mining adit). Other isolated features receive trinomials in some parts of Montana while not in others (e.g. isolated rock cairns). Applying numbers in these cases seems to reflect in large part a decision on the part of the recorder about the individual significance of the location.

We advocate a policy of routinely applying Smithsonian numbers to isolated features, or alternatively considering more isolated features together and with other properties as numbered districts/sites. Often, it may be the case that future expanded survey in an area will demonstrate that such "isolated" features are actually part of a larger resource that would be numbered. Without knowledge of their existence in the database, it will be difficult, if not impossible to further consider them. We also suspect that our limited understanding of certain common isolated features, such as rock cairns, is in part due to a lack of consistent recording procedures. Standardized recording and application of trinomials would allow us to better examine the distribution and variability within classes of isolated features.

Minimal Activity Loci – In practice, it is sometimes justifiable to record more than a single artifact as essentially an isolated find or what some of us have referred to as a type of "minimal activity loci" (MAL). Distinguishing the cutoff between these kinds of MALs and sites is traditionally a problem in field survey. Again, we see no easy resolution to defining what is or is not a site. We do, however, recognize that it is impractical to apply a Smithsonian trinomial to every two or more artifacts found in a given location, particularly in situations of extensive artifact "background noise".

A variety of solutions to the problem of limited or diffuse, featureless artifact scatters have been advocated and implemented. Unfortunately, without some minimal, consistent criteria for applying numbers in these situations, we will continue to have problems in interpreting the information we are submitting to the database. Short of rereading reports, we have no reliable means to determine when numbers were or were not applied by different researchers to Small artifact scatters.

Recognizing that there is unlikely to be a perfect solution or universal consensus, we suggest the arbitrary premise that, in situations where no features are present, five or more artifacts in a location warrant a site number. The outstanding question in most cases will then be one of defining a discrete location and its boundary. This must probably continue to be left to professional judgment. We suggest that single artifacts separated by distances greater than 50 meters apart may be best treated as isolated finds. In this framework, numbered areas represent concentrations of artifacts, conceivably amidst a background of isolated finds.

The above guideline does not, of course, prevent researchers from applying numbers to featureless artifact finds of less than five artifacts, either as a policy or on a case-by-case basis. Most researchers will in fact probably want to record most Early Prehistoric finds with a trinomial, regardless of the number of artifacts identified during the initial recording. What a recognized threshold provides is the knowledge that any grouping of five or more artifacts will be in the Cultural Resource Information System. Below this threshold, the numbering of low frequency artifact locations will continue to vary, reflecting for the most part rare or social localities probably warranting our further consideration.

Districts

Because, in theory, districts represent more than simply the sum of their individual parts, we recommend first applying a number to the recognized district, historic or prehistoric. This number refers to the district as a whole and should incorporate all of its individual component's identifications and locations.

Since districts are also collections of separate sites, buildings, structures, objects, or whatever, we believe it is also useful to sometimes give numbers to some of the individual entities in a district. We feel that this is not only consistent with the definition of a district as a collection of component properties but, for various reasons, also provides better management of the information about the district. First, information on individual properties that are assigned numbers is independently accessible while information about properties without trinomials must be accessed through the general district number and site form. Second, since many districts have not been 100% inventoried or are otherwise subject to being frequently updated by different researchers, it is much easier and consistent to use trinomials to identify and add component properties than to use some other kind of "feature" or "locality" designations. And third, individual trinomials will enhance our file searches by initially identifying the nature of the recorded properties in a specific location within a more general district.

How many numbers to apply within a District is not easily predetermined. For archaeological districts, the situation is perhaps straightforward -we would apply numbers to each location that would normally be recognized independently as an archaeological site or isolated feature (see above), regardless of whether one has taken the opportunity to consider the localities together as a district. Historic districts seem to raise more questions, perhaps because we better understand how to interpret them critically and to assess the relationships among their individual properties. This knowledge enables us to be more judicious in applying numbers and to consolidate more effectively related entities under a single number. Thus, to the extent that a meaningful, direct association exists among individual components in proximity to each "other, we feel a single number may be appropriate and sufficient. Examples might include the buildings of a farm or homestead, the structures at a mill site, the houses in a residential district, or even the adits along a hillside.

On the other hand, non-contiguous or major functionally disparate entities within a historic district would seem to us to warrant separate numbers. This makes use of our professional knowledge and understanding of the properties "individuality" and, more importantly, allows us to better define and talk about the nature and distribution of cultural resources in a district at the file search level. As district boundaries (particularly rural and industrial Districts) may be very large and contain considerable open space between individual resources, it is frequently helpful to have information immediately accessible about the specific location of its constituent components. Examples might include a rural district comprised of numerous farmsteads, each with its own number. A numbered mining district could be made up of separately numbered mine locations, each with its own mill, boarding house, mine office, and adits. In urban historic districts, major houses and buildings could receive individual numbers.

Finally, for the numbering system to continue to be useful it is critical that 1) the legal locations provided for the District trinomial encompass the locations of all the individual properties, and 2) the numbered individual properties and the district are sufficiently cross-referenced on the recording forms to enable

researchers to understand the relationship between them. This will require the updating of site forms as necessary, and should be the joint responsibility of the recorder and those of us involved in managing the site files.

Multi-County Sites/Districts

Long or large linear sites and districts such as railroads, irrigation projects, roadways, and trails, become problematic when they cross, one or more county lines or even the whole state. This is because the Smithsonian numbering system is county-based so that a trinomial can refer only to locations within a single county.

Working within this numbering system, we advise applying a number for each county that a multi-county resource is located in. A single site form should be prepared (and updated as necessary) to be filed under one of the counties in which the resource is located. The site record for numbers that are assigned in other counties can then simply be a cross-reference to the selected county number under which the forms are filed.

The numbering of independent features or properties associated with multi-county sites or districts should be treated as described above for districts in general.

We also advise considering the dividing up of possible multi-county resources when meaningful entities can be identified within them. For example, logging or mining railroad spurs may be best numbered separate from the major railway system (again with appropriate cross-referencing).

To facilitate multiple county-based numbers for what is essentially one entity, we will endeavor to keep a file of the names and numbers of multi-county resources. Recorders can refer to this list in determining whether all or part of their resource may have already been recorded and what additional numbers or information (particularly locations) may be necessary.

Multi-Component sites

We recommend that a single trinomial generally be applied for a given location, regardless of the number of the components exhibited and whether they are prehistoric, historic, or both. Standard site forms allow for the description of both historic and prehistoric components and the Cultural Resource Information System is set up to describe different "site types" at the same location under a single number.

Exceptions, of course, may occur. Cases where two resources partially overlap but one is not subsumed within the other may be best dealt with by different numbers for each, particularly where prehistoric and historic resources are concerned. Individual numbers may also be appropriate within districts for individual properties, which nonetheless occupy the same or similar space (see above).

In Closing

We understand that applying numbers also means filling out and reviewing forms. As the ultimate source of information on Montana's prehistoric and historic record, we see this documentation as a fundamental responsibility of our profession. We can't not do the work simply because it is work.

Finally, while records without numbers have limited accessibility, numbers without complete records are also deficient. Currently, locations and other information on resources are not entered into the computer files of the Cultural Resource Information System until complete forms are obtained from the recorder. These sites, while they may have been assigned numbers, are not accessible through file searches in the interim. For many sites this "interim" period has extended far too long possibly resulting in duplicate recording or even endangerment of the site itself through lack of knowledge while making compliance recommendations.

Comments

This planning bulletin represents our current thoughts, knowledge, and judgment. We anticipate preparing new bulletins on a wide range of topics and as new information on a previously covered topic becomes available. Your comments and recommendations for this and future bulletins are very important.