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## Lesson 5.5

# SITE ROBBERS

**Subjects:** science, social studies, language arts.

**Skills:** analysis, synthesis, evaluation.

**Strategies:** reading, interviewing, writing, discussion, analogy, values clarification, communication.

**Duration:** 60 to 90 minutes.

**Class Size:** any; groups of 3 to 4.



Shell mask from Macon County, North Carolina, ca. AD 1500.

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## Objectives

Students will use an interview with a Native American to write a newspaper article or letter that expresses concern about robbing archaeological sites.

## Materials

For each student, a copy of “A Point of View” and “Fact Sheet.”

## Vocabulary

*Context:* the relationship artifacts have to one another and the situation in which they are found.

*Projectile point:* a pointed implement (usually made from chipped stone) that was attached to the end of a spear or an arrow. This is a general term that includes both spear points and arrowheads.

*Stratify:* to form or place in layers.

*Vandalism:* willful or malicious defacing or destruction of public or private property.

## Background

The desire to own and/or sell ancient Indian artifacts has been popular for many years. In search of artifacts, people dig, backhoe, and bulldoze their way through sites occupied hundreds and thousands of years ago by ancient peoples. Since Native Americans in North Carolina often buried their dead with offerings, looters dig their way into grave sites in search of jewelry, pottery, and other objects. The skeletons are removed haphazardly from their resting place and are sometimes found scattered around the site. Graves are not the only parts of archaeological sites that looters destroy. They also dig into the ground around house sites and trash pits in order to find projectile points and other stone tools.

Whenever looters dig on a site, they are destroying archaeological data that help archaeologists learn about what life was like for Native North Americans. Archaeologists rely on finding archaeological artifacts in the place they were originally discarded, or in *context*, to help them draw conclusions about the people who lived at the site. Ancient human remains, if they are to be disturbed at all, must be treated with respect and carefully recorded in the location where they were originally buried so that information will not be lost. Physical anthropologists study human remains and help archaeologists understand prehistoric nutrition, ages, injuries, diseases,

and genetic relationships. Irreplaceable scientific information is lost forever when ancient sites are looted. Equally important, *vandalism* of graves offends the living descendants of ancient people.

Vandalism and theft at ancient sites shows a lack of respect for past peoples. All cultures have beliefs about theft and the proper treatment of the dead and feel very shocked and upset when the graves and former homes of their ancestors are disturbed. When excavating sites where Indian peoples are buried, archaeologists work closely with modern Native American groups. Archaeologists will avoid excavating the graves of Native Americans if the modern ancestors do not want the human remains disturbed. If the graves are threatened by the construction of a road or reservoir, archaeologists will work with Native Americans to insure that the human remains are treated respectfully during their excavation, removal, and reburial.

## Setting the Stage

1. Discuss the purpose of Memorial Day and the tradition of grave decorating. Explore various reasons for this custom.

## Procedure

1. Share background information with students.
2. Have students read “A Point of View.”
3. Have students imagine they are newspaper reporters. Tell them they just learned that the site where Mr. Jeffries believes his ancestors lived was vandalized by people in search of artifacts to collect and sell. As reporters, their assignment is to write an article about the vandalism. They should use “A Point of View” and “Fact Sheet” as resources for facts and insights. Tell students that in organizing information for their article, they should answer the five key journalistic questions: What happened? When? Where? Who was involved? Why (did it happen; matter; etc.)? Their articles should include observations about the impact the loss of information has on understanding the ancient villagers’ lives, along with the thoughts and feelings about the incident expressed by the archaeologist and, especially, Mr. Jeffries.

## Closure

Ask students to think about some special object that is in their home that a family member values for sentimental reasons. Perhaps it is an antique dresser that belonged to their mother’s grandmother. Perhaps it is the baseball cap an older brother wore when his team won a regional championship. How would they and their family feel if someone vandalized or stole such an item? Why are these things important to people?

## Evaluation

Students turn in their articles for evaluation.

## Links

Part 1: Lessons 1.1–1.8.

Lesson 5.4: “Artifact Ethics.”

Lesson 5.7: “Take Action, Save the Past.”

## Extension

The piece entitled “Police Track Down Looters” is adapted from several newspaper articles describing an actual case of looting at the Hardaway Site in western North Carolina. Read the excerpt to students and ask the following questions:

- What evidence did the detectives collect?
- Do you feel there was enough evidence to convict the couple of looting on a protected site? Why or why not?
- Do you feel that people digging unlawfully on Indian sites are disrespectful of Native American people? Why or why not?

## Sources

- Smith, Shelley J., Jeanne M. Moe, Kelly A. Letts, and Danielle M. Paterson. 1993. *Intrigue of the Past: A Teacher’s Activity Guide for Fourth through Seventh Grades*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Department of the Interior. [This lesson is adapted from “Grave Robbers” on pp. 117–118, courtesy of the Bureau of Land Management.]
- Ward, H. Trawick, and R. P. Stephen Davis, Jr. 1999. *Time Before History: The Archaeology of North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. [The image in this lesson’s main heading is taken from Figure 5.22.]

## A Point of View

John Jeffries belongs to the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation and lives in Hillsborough, North Carolina. Mr. Jeffries’s Native American name is John Blackfeather. He, like the other 400 members of his tribe, descends from Siouan-speaking people who lived in the area long before Europeans arrived. Their territory covered parts of northern Orange County up through Person County and into southern Virginia.

As is true for many of North Carolina’s Indian people, part of Mr. Jeffries’s history is lost. European diseases, to which Native Americans had no immunity, mercilessly killed his ancestors, wiping out many who would hand down oral traditions and customs. Of those who remained in early Colonial times, conflict claimed some. Survivors faced removal to reservations away from their homelands.

Put in Colonial schools and churches, Mr. Jeffries’s people found that what they had managed to keep of their heritage began slipping away as their children learned other lessons.

Mr. Jeffries knows that some of his history speaks from the ground—the kinds of tools and jewelry his people used; the size and shape of their houses; the layout of their villages; the foods they ate; the rituals and offerings they used for burials. So each time archaeologists excavate parts of a 17th-century village near Hillsborough Mr. Jeffries believes was home to his ancestors, he regularly comes to watch and learn what archaeologists find.

Asked how he would feel and what he would say to vandals if they dug up the site to take artifacts or human remains, Mr. Jeffries replied:

“There’s a man I know about. He has a barber shop near a town where some of my ancestors lived. He has relics all over his shop, and he has a skull. That really bothers me. The bones really bother me. The skull gives me the chills; it upsets me. I did a ceremony where I touched the skull. There’s no way to describe my feelings.

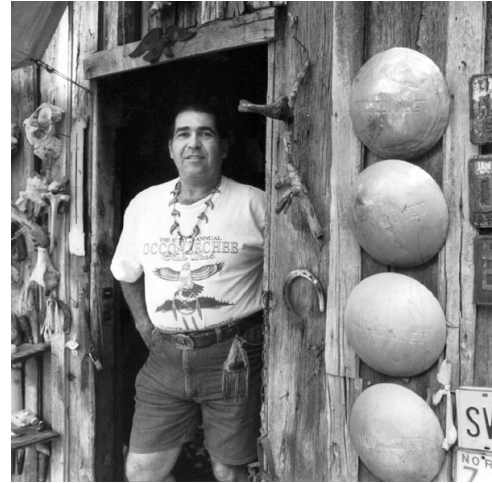
“Graves, in particular, should not be disturbed. But I’m of two minds about that. The archaeologists I know treat remains in a respectful way. So do their students. I wouldn’t want them exhuming people. Nobody needs to disturb another person that way. When I see remains of people in museums, I think their spirits are not resting. Would you want somebody lifting out your grandmother?

“But I know, too, that if the archaeologists didn’t open the graves, I wouldn’t know my ancestors. This is my history, and I wouldn’t have it if they didn’t do that. But I expect the archaeologists to have respect. When they open graves, I do a special prayer. If I touch the bones, I feel those people.

“I’m against removing artifacts from graves—by archaeologists or anybody else. Once in a grave, I saw an Occaneechi pot. I wanted this pot bad. But, it belonged to the person it was buried with. The Creator gave me the chance to see something my ancestors made. But I couldn’t take it; it belongs with the person.

“How can I explain this so non-Natives can understand?

“People who’d rob graves are thieves. They’re thieves of a culture, the past and the present.



John Jeffries.

They steal our identity. They also intrude on someone's privacy—the people who are buried there. Those sites are special places; they are the resting places of ancient people.

“Fortunately, I've never witnessed vandalism. I would hate to go into a site and see it all dug up, destroyed. I'd hate to think how I would act if I caught somebody.

“There's nothing special about Native American stuff. Why does anybody else want it? I'll tell you why: they want money. They want to sell our things, like this man I knew about who took gorgets [a kind of ornament carved from marine shell] and sold them. But these things have no monetary value to anyone who respects Native culture.

“Really! What I want to know is why do people want to possess these things? If they are not Native, they can't possess the spirits of my people. Only Natives can possess the spirits of their ancestors. By spirits, I mean it would be like if you wear your grandmother's brooch. It may not mean anything to somebody else. But when you wear it, you are holding her, touching her.

“To hold something like an arrowhead in my hand and know it belonged to my ancestors, it connects me to them. It also gives me a greater sense of respect for them. Understanding how they could survive using those implements. They had to be a strong people.”

## Fact Sheet

- Vandals destroyed part of Occaneechi Town last night. They struck between midnight and 6 a.m.
- Occaneechi Town is a 17th-century Siouan Indian village site. It is located in Orange County.
- Police don't know how many people vandalized the site. Footprints make police think there were two men and one woman.
- The vandals dug up two graves. They scattered the people's remains, and they stole the offerings that had been placed in the graves.
- Archaeologists had scientifically recorded information from one of the destroyed graves. They knew, thus, that the vandals stole a clay pipe, a bead necklace, several arrow points, and the beautiful clay pot Mr. Jeffries talked about in his interview. Archaeologists had not studied the other grave.
- "The information about that person is gone forever," said Dr. Explorit, the site archaeologist. "We will never know how that person died or anything at all about him or her. We will never know what items grieving relatives and friends had placed in the grave. The disrespect the looters showed to the deceased, the descendants, and to all of us in terms of knowledge lost is inexcusable."
- Besides looting the graves, the vandals dug up a deep trash pit the Indian people had used. Archaeologists had not had the chance to excavate and record the pit's contents. The vandals threw out what was in the pit. Deer bone, pieces of broken pottery, and rock cracked by cooking fires were found all over the ground. Police and the archaeologist, Dr. Explorit, think the looters were looking for arrowheads.
- "The vandalism makes me angry and sad," said Dr. Explorit.
- Mr. Jeffries is a descendant of the Indian people who lived in Occaneechi Town. He said he was angry and sad, too. "Those vandals are thieves of my culture," said Mr. Jeffries. "They also intruded on the privacy of the people who were buried there. Why would anybody do that? Those are special places; they are the resting places of ancient people."
- For other comments and insights by Mr. Jeffries, refer to "A Point of View."

## **Police Track Down Looters**

**by David Deese, Stanly News & Press Staff Writer**

A screen commonly used to sift dirt for artifacts was found this week at the Hardaway archaeological site. Earlier in the week, two people carrying digging tools had been discovered near where the screen was found. Hardaway was recently named a historic landmark, which protects it from unlawful digging for artifacts.

The couple was discovered on the property Monday morning by the land owners. On Tuesday, the landowner took detectives and a state archaeologist to the place where the couple was discovered on the property. The screen was found near where the man and his wife had been standing. They told police during questioning that they had left a screen at the site.

Near the screen, the archaeologist found small piles of dirt created when soil is sifted through a screen. The detective described the soil as “freshly dug” and the screen showed signs that it had been recently used for sifting dirt. Also nearby were stone tools used by ancient Indian cultures. The archaeologist said that the Hardaway projectile point, or arrowhead, and other rare tools like snub-nosed scrapers are valued by people who collect Indian artifacts.

The Hardaway site is protected by state law, and there are many signs warning that the area is off-limits to digging.

“One sign was within 50 feet of where the couple were found,” said the archaeologist.

When the couple was discovered, the landowner told them they were on protected property and asked for their names and addresses. The couple would not reveal their names and left the site. They were later arrested by police. Inside their backpack, the police found digging tools, including a pick, and a small shovel. No Indian artifacts were found in their possession.

The Hardaway site is important because soil at the site is stratified in layers. This means the artifacts are found at different levels below the surface. The deeper in the ground an artifact is found, the older the artifact is. Before they dug at Hardaway, archaeologists had no way to date artifacts of ancient Indian cultures because all artifacts found were from a single soil layer. Because of the soil layers at Hardaway, archaeologists have been able to date similar artifacts found at sites all across the southeastern United States.

“Hardaway is very unique, and it is being substantially affected by people coming in and looting the site with no respect for the history of North Carolina,” said the state archaeologist.

[The above article was excerpted and revised from two articles: “Badin Indian Site Declared U.S. Landmark” by David Deese, The Stanly News and Press, July 10, 1990; and “Police Recover Dirt-Sifting Tool at Indian Camp” by David Deese, The Stanly News and Press, July 12, 1990.]