

# KnowHow #4

INFORMATION AND ASSISTANCE FROM THE MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *What to Do When Human Burials are Accidentally Uncovered*

### **1. Why are bones sometimes found?**

In Massachusetts, many unmarked graves exist without gravestones, fences, tombstones, or other surface indications of their presence. These are chiefly the graves of prehistoric and historic Indians, which may never have been marked at all; and graves which had been identified at one time in the past, but the markings are no longer visible. As a result, bones are often found during ordinary ground disturbance activities such as the construction of new homes, utilities, or roads; in the agricultural or industrial use of a site; or the excavation of sand or gravel borrow. Bones are also sometimes found eroding out of areas exposed by natural erosion, floodwater scouring, or sand dune formation.

A new law has been enacted which establishes procedures to follow when human bones are accidentally discovered.

### **2. Who is involved?**

Private citizens, State and Local Police, Medical Examiners, State Archaeologist, and the Commission on Indian Affairs.

### **3. What should you do if you discover bones?**

Do not touch or disturb the bones. Notify the state or local police and the regional medical examiner about the discovery and location.

### **4. What does the Medical Examiner do?**

The Medical Examiner investigates the discovery to determine whether the bones are human, and whether they are recent or more than 100 years old. If the bones are less than 100 years old, a criminal investigation may be warranted. If the bones are more than 100 years old, the Medical Examiner then notifies the State Archaeologist, who immediately conducts an archaeological investigation of the site. Throughout these investigations, the police authorities must insure that the site is protected from further damage.

### **5. What does the State Archaeologist do?**

The State Archaeologist investigates the site to determine the age, cultural association and identity of the burial. If the State Archaeologist determines that the burial is that of a Native American, the Commission on Indian Affairs is notified. The State Archaeologist consults with the landowner to determine whether the burial can remain undisturbed. In the case of development projects, the owner and State Archaeologist discuss whether there are prudent and feasible steps the owner can take to protect the burial. If it is impossible to avoid future harm to the burial, the State Archaeologist removes the remains.

### **6. What does the Commission on Indian Affairs do?**

The archaeological investigation of Indian burials is monitored by the Commission on Indian Affairs to insure that the remains are treated respectfully.

Please remember: Once bones or artifacts are removed from the site, valuable information concerning the identity and age of the human remains is lost. Therefore, it is important not to disturb the site in any way until the State Archaeologist can conduct an investigation and record the discovery.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 38, section 6; Chapter 9, sections 26A & 27C; Chapter 7, section 38A; Chapter 114, section 17; as amended by Chapter 659 of the Acts of 1983 and Chapter 386 of the Acts of 1989.

### **For Further Information:**

Please contact the State Archaeologist at the Massachusetts Historical Commission.

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