The Archaeological Guide to Iowa

William E. Whittaker | Lynn M. Alex | Mary C. De La Garza

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Iowa has the reputation of being one big corn field, so you may be surprised to learn it boasts a rich crop of recorded archaeological sites as well—approximately 27,000 at last count. Some are spectacular, such as the one hundred mounds at Sny Magill in Effigy Mounds National Monument, while others consist of old abandoned farmsteads or small scatters of prehistoric flakes and heated rocks.

For people who want to experience Iowa’s archaeological heritage first hand, this one-of-a-kind guidebook shows the way to sixty-eight important sites. Many are open to visitors or can be seen from a public location; others, on private land or no longer visible on the landscape, live on through artifact displays. The guide also includes a few important sites that are not open to visitors because these places have unique stories to tell. Sites of every type, from every time period, and in every corner of the state are featured. Whether you have a few hours to indulge your curiosity or are planning a road trip across the state, this guide will take you to places where Iowa’s deep history comes to life.

“This authoritative guide is a must for all professional and amateur archaeologists and every layperson interested in Iowa’s prehistory and history. Between these covers are succinct, authoritative essays on sites ranging from post-glacial Native American mammoth hunters, mound builders, and farmers, to twentieth-century Euro-Americans and African Americans.”

—DAVID MAYER GRADWOHL, professor emeritus and founding director, Iowa State University Archaeological Laboratory

“As Frances H. Kennedy’s American Indian Places does for the United States, The Archaeological Guide to Iowa directs people to sites and places exhibiting the artifacts that tell the story of almost 12,000 years of human habitation in the state.”

—JEROME THOMPSON, State Curator, State Historical Society of Iowa

WILLIAM E. WHITTAKER is a research archaeologist at the Office of the State Archaeologist, University of Iowa. He is the editor of Frontier Forts of Iowa (Iowa, 2009) and the Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society. He lives in Iowa City, Iowa. LYNN M. ALEX retired in 2013 as the education and outreach program director at the University of Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist. She has authored two books, Exploring Iowa’s Past and Iowa’s Archaeological Past (Iowa, 2000). She resides in Iowa City, Iowa. MARY C. DE LA GARZA is a program director at the University of Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist. She makes her home in Long Grove, Iowa.

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The Archaeological Guide to Iowa


Reviewed by Thomas Loebel, Illinois State Archaeological Society, Prairie Research Institute, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

I have to admit, I’m a sucker for regional archaeological overviews. One shelf of my library is crowded with these kind of state or regional level reviews. I use them as a personal “Dummies Guide” to quickly get up to speed on the archaeology of a region or time period I don’t know much about. Thus, I was more than happy to see a new archaeological guide to the neighboring state of Iowa.

This new entry, The Archaeological Guide to Iowa, edited by three long-time Iowa Office of the State Archaeologists, is indeed just that, a guide. It’s somewhat similar to the popular Roadside Geology series guides that have been around for quite a while. Descriptions and history on sixty-eight significant or noteworthy sites are contained within the covers, and unlike most state-level overviews, directions on how to visit each site or associated interpretive display are also provided. Included for each site are a short 1–5 page summary, photos, directions, and additional references for those interested in more information. These quick summaries can be read and digested within even the shortest of attention spans. While both the professional and amateur alike will find something of interest, the book is squarely aimed at the general public, but may find some additional use by those teaching high school or undergraduate level classes on Native Americans or local Iowa history. While the brief summaries of each site make the information easily accessible, for those interested in a bit of more “meat on the bone,” the extra references provided will need to be mined. A great companion volume that could be used in conjunction with this guide is another more traditional review, Iowa’s Archaeological Past, also by Lynn Alex (2010).

The volume is organized in a unique, yet relevant way. Rather than following the traditional presentation of cultural sequences from oldest to youngest, sites are presented in relation to Iowa’s rather unique watershed. The dominant flow of Iowa’s largely northwest/southeast-oriented rivers affected both prehistoric and historic settlement patterns across the state. From west to east, and north to south, sites are presented in an order that follows the natural watershed of the state. While it initially makes the overall organization a bit confusing, in reality I like the presentation of sites in a manner that relates their location and significance to their position within a larger landscape.

The Introduction contains the familiar presentation of cultural periods, with brief description/overview of prehistoric periods, along with a listing of sites falling within each period of prehistory or history. A map and key to sites included in the book is also presented. The map could have been larger, but this is a minor shortcoming. The book is...
well illustrated with numerous black and white photos, plus an additional 51 color photographs of various artifacts and sites. Rounding out the introduction is a quick primer on the etiquette of visiting sites, laws protecting archaeological resources, and the importance of preservation.

The body of the book is composed of descriptions of and directions to sixty-eight sites ranging from the well-known and visible (Double Ditch and Malchow Mound Group), to the invisible (McNeal Fan site), the unusual (Iowa State Veterinary Carcass Pit), and the disappeared, disinterred, and destroyed (Pacific City Cemetery and Fort Dodge Military Post), together with a tour of the Urban Archaeology of Downtown DesMoines. Sites discussed run the gamut from the earliest known (Paleoindian—Five Island Lake) to the Protohistoric (Blood Run) and the Historic (Elgin Brewery), as well as those connected to historic events (Hitchcock House—underground railroad, and Sgt. Floyd’s burial—Lewis and Clark expedition), providing a broad and appealing range of sites, settings, and history. Some sites on the list, like most open-air archaeological sites, will require a bit of imagination and an understanding of the landscape to gain the full appreciation of their significance, while others direct the reader to the more obvious and visible end of the archaeological spectrum. The majority of the sites (both existing and destroyed) and interpretive exhibits described can be visited by the public, although a select few are on private property or are sensitive in nature and cannot be directly accessed.

All in all, I find the volume an interesting departure from the usual, and for those who want to take a drive and experience archaeology firsthand, a great resource.