

Think Like an Archaeologist

Stratigraphy

Archaeology is the study of past people through the things they left behind. In this lesson, students will learn how archaeologists study past people through stratigraphy, or soil layers. Students will identify artifacts from different time periods and match them to the appropriate layer of soil. Each layer of soil represents a different period in Mobile's history. Discuss how cultures change through time and what this says about Mobile's history.

Time Frame: 30-60 minutes

Objectives:

- Students will learn archaeology is the study of past people through the things they left behind.
- Students will employ archaeological methods to study the past, understanding the same process is used whether examining artifacts from 50 years ago or 1000 years.
- Students will understand how soil is deposited through time; the oldest soil layers will be the deepest, while the most recent soil layers will be near the ground surface

Relevant Standards:

- 3rd Grade: SS10.3.13 Describe prehistoric and historic American Indian cultures, governments, and economics in Alabama.
SS10.3.13.1 Identifying roles of archaeologists and paleontologists
- 8th Grade: SS 10.8.1 Explain how artifacts and other archaeological findings provide evidence of the nature and movement of prehistoric groups of people.

Key Terms:

- Archaeology: The study of past human life through things people left behind
- Artifact: Something portable that was made or modified by humans
- Assemblage: A group of artifacts found in association with one another
- Stratigraphy: Layers of soil on an archaeological site
- Chronology: the arrangement of events in the order they occurred (like a timeline)

Lesson Procedures:

1. Explain that archaeology is the study of past human life through the things people left behind, such as artifacts. Archaeologists study the unwritten past – whether it's because the sites predate written records, the written records were biased, or certain perspectives weren't included.

2. One tool archaeologists use to learn about the past is “stratigraphy,” or soil layers. Each soil layer represents a different time period, so archaeologists carefully excavate each layer, ensuring they don’t mix artifacts from different layers. The oldest soil layers are at the bottom, while the youngest (or most recently deposited) layers are at the top, similar to laundry in a basket.

Resources:

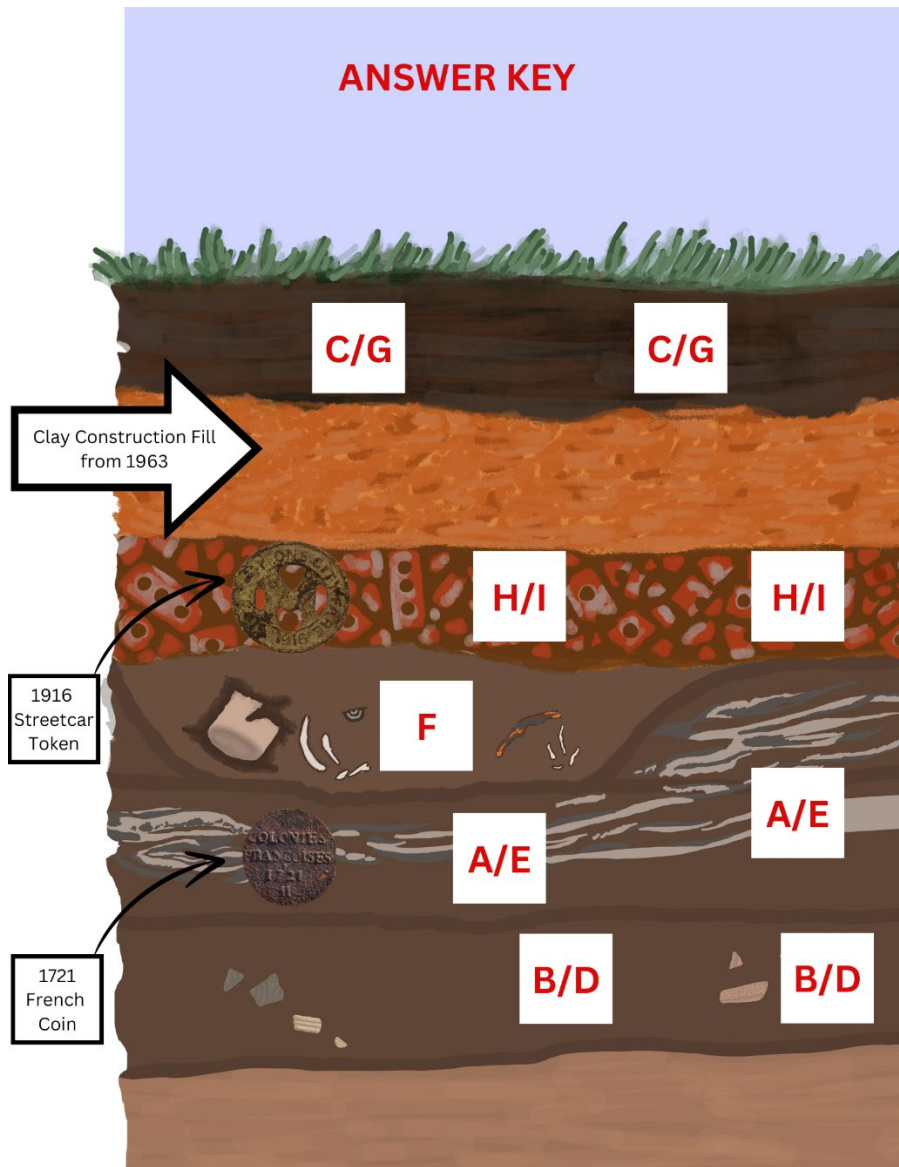
[What is Stratigraphy?](#) Blog Post

[What is Stratigraphy?](#) YouTube Video



Note: This video is part of our series “Ask an Archaeologist,” which includes other short videos about key archaeological concepts

3. Hand out the stratigraphy worksheet Give them 5-10 minutes to examine the artifacts on the first page. In pairs, a small group, or on their own, consider the following questions:
 - a. What are the artifacts?
 - b. What materials are they made of?
 - c. What were these artifacts used for?
 - d. What artifact is the most recent? Why do you think that?
 - e. What artifact is the oldest? Why do you think that?
4. Ask students to match the artifact to the soil layer it belongs with by writing the letter of the artifact in the blank on the soil layer. Use the placement of the soil layers and the other items in the layer as clues.
5. As a class, vote on which artifacts are the oldest and which are the most recent. Show them the correct arrangement. See answer key on next page.
6. Either in pairs or as a class, discuss changes through time. Start by asking students to share their answers to the questions in Step 3. Other discussion avenues might include:
 - a. What can we learn about the people who used these artifacts? What activities they were doing, how they got their food and supplies, what they were eating, what they did for fun, what was available to them, what they could afford, etc.
 - b. How has technology changed through time? In the earlier components, many of the materials were made from things we can find in nature (stone, animal bone, shell, and clay) but as time goes on, we see more manufactured materials (glass, metal, plastic)
 - c. How did people get their resources in different time periods? Earlier layers include materials that would have been obtained through hunting, gathering, and fishing. Through time, people had access to stores and mass-manufactured products.
 - d. Why is stratigraphy important? It preserves the relationships between artifacts. We can see what came before and after different settlements, and we can also see what was used around the same time.



Background Information:

All of the artifacts in this activity were found near downtown Mobile during excavations for the [I-10 Mobile River Bridge Archaeology Project](#). Most of the artifacts are from the late 19th and early 20th century and were found in residential areas. While archaeologists usually store the artifacts they find at a museum, these artifacts were found on the surface of the ground, so they lost their *provenience*, or context for when they were deposited. Because we don't know their original location, we now use them for educational activities.

Got any questions? Have feedback on the lesson? Want to find more opportunities in archaeology? Get in touch with us at cas@southalabama.edu or visit our [website](#).

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Stratigraphy

Stratigraphy refers to layers of soil at an archaeological site. Each layer represents a different period in time. Archaeologists carefully *excavate*, or dig, each layer of soil to find artifacts from that time period. The oldest soil layers were deposited first, so they are on the bottom, while the most recent layers were deposited toward the top.

Instructions:

- The artifacts pictured below were found near downtown Mobile. Determine which are the oldest and which are the youngest by considering:
 - What are the artifacts?
 - What materials are they made of?
 - What activities were these artifacts used for?
- The next page shows the stratigraphy, or soil layers, at the site where the artifacts were found. Match the artifact to the soil layer it belongs in and write the letter of the artifact in the blank.



A. Shell Button



B. Stone Tool



C. 2001 Quarter



D. Incised Pottery



E. Die made of Animal Bone



F. 1896 Mardi Gras Badge



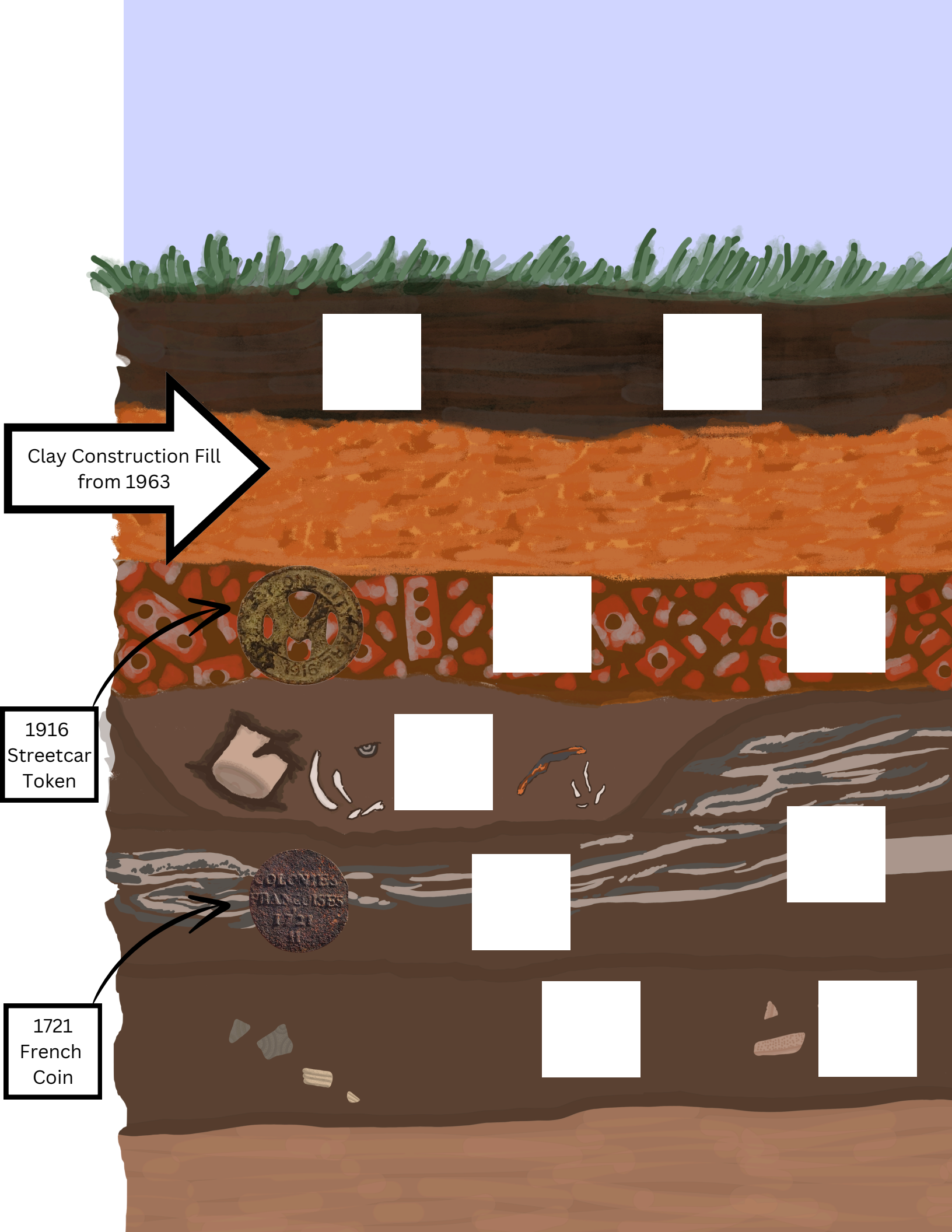
G. Plastic Sunglasses



H. Transfer Print Pottery



I. Porcelain Doll



Clay Construction Fill
from 1963

1916
Streetcar
Token

1721
French
Coin

