

Who Owns a Found Piece of a Craft? Finders Law, Meteorite Precedent, Federal Land, and Sovereign Claims

Version 1.10 · October 2026 · nhilaw.com/issues/e3.html

Version 1.10, October 2026. Legal information, not legal advice. Published by the [Emergent Frontiers Institute](#) (NHI Law is not a law firm). Citations checked in October 2026; check every citation before relying on it.

Key points

- Material of unknown or non-human origin found on private land most likely belongs to the landowner, by analogy to the meteorite cases (*Goddard v. Winchell*; *Oregon Iron Co. v. Hughes*).
 - On federal land collection is restricted (BLM, NPS); on tribal land tribal law governs and NAGPRA may apply; debris from a U.S. or foreign government craft stays that government's property absent express abandonment.
 - The government has recovered privately held extraterrestrial material before, by forfeiture (*One Lucite Ball*) and by seizure in an investigation (*Davis*).
 - Document the find in place (photographs, GPS, witnesses), confirm land status, get the landowner's written assignment, and start a chain-of-custody record at once ([Form E3-1](#)).
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1. Summary

Material found by private persons (debris, fragments, artifacts) raises ownership questions that existing law answers by analogy. The answer depends on where the material was found and on who may claim to have owned it.

Setting	Likely owner	Authority
Embedded in or lying on private land, origin non-human or unknown	Landowner, under the meteorite rule (material that arrives naturally becomes part of the land)	<i>Goddard v. Winchell</i> , 86 Iowa 71, 52 N.W. 1124 (1892); <i>Oregon Iron Co. v. Hughes</i> , 47 Or. 313, 81 P. 572 (1905) (Willamette meteorite)
Found on private land, but	Owner of the craft, unless	Common law of finds (lost,

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traceable to a human-owned craft	abandoned; finder may have rights against all but the true owner	mislaid, abandoned property); state finder statutes
On federal land	United States; collection may be prohibited or regulated	Property Clause; 43 C.F.R. part 8360 (BLM rules, including meteorite collection policy); 36 C.F.R. §2.1 (NPS prohibits removal); ARPA, 16 U.S.C. §§470aa-470mm, protects “material remains of past <i>human</i> life or activities” at least 100 years old (§470bb(1)), so it would reach material of non-human origin only if the item were itself a remain of past human activity (for example, an object people had worked, used, or buried more than a century ago)
On tribal land	The tribe, under tribal law and federal Indian law; state finders law generally does not apply within reservation boundaries	ARPA covers “Indian lands” (16 U.S.C. §470bb(4)) and conditions permits for excavation there on tribal consent (§470cc(g)(2)); NAGPRA gives tribes ownership of “Native American cultural items” discovered on “tribal land” after Nov. 16, 1990 (25 U.S.C. §3002(a)) and requires written notice of inadvertent discoveries (§3002(d)). “Native American” means “of, or relating to, a tribe, people, or culture that is indigenous to the United States” (§3001(9)), so NHI remains or artifacts would fall under NAGPRA only if a tribe showed a cultural relationship to them. Report any discovery on reservation land to the tribe

Setting	Likely owner	Authority
		first
From a U.S. government aircraft or craft	United States; government property is not abandoned without express act	<i>Sea Hunt, Inc. v. Unidentified Shipwrecked Vessel</i> , 221 F.3d 634 (4th Cir. 2000) (express abandonment required for sovereign vessels); Sunken Military Craft Act, 10 U.S.C. §113 note (2004)
From a foreign state's craft	Foreign state, which may assert sovereign immunity	<i>Odyssey Marine Exploration, Inc. v. Unidentified Shipwrecked Vessel</i> , 657 F.3d 1159 (11th Cir. 2011); <i>Global Marine Exploration, Inc. v. Republic of France</i> , 151 F.4th 1296 (11th Cir. 2025)
Claimed by the U.S. government on national security grounds	Contested; government may assert ownership, seize, or condemn (Issue E1)	Fifth Amendment; H.R. 8800 §1767 (proposed)
A non-human craft has no recognized sovereign owner under current law. Material from it found on private land is best analogized to a meteorite: it belongs to the landowner. The government would argue, in the alternative, that material connected to a government recovery operation is government property (for example, debris collected by, or crash sites controlled by, the government), or would take it with compensation.		

2. Common law of finds

- **Lost property** (unintentionally parted with): finder's title good against all but the true owner.
- **Mislaid property** (intentionally placed and forgotten): owner of the premises holds for the true owner.
- **Abandoned property**: title to the first person who takes possession with intent to own.
- **Embedded property** (property that has become part of the soil): belongs to the landowner, as with meteorites under *Goddard v. Winchell. Ritz v. Selma United Methodist Church*, 467 N.W.2d 266, 268-69 (Iowa 1991), states the lost, mislaid, abandoned, and treasure trove categories and shows the limits of the embedded category: currency buried in jars and tin cans "did not bear the characteristics of property embedded in the soil," because the burial showed the owner was trying to preserve it, so the former owner's estate kept title against

both the finder and the later landowner. Material that a person deliberately concealed (a recovered fragment hidden by a witness, for example) would be treated the same way. KeyCite shows a yellow flag (“declined to extend” by *In re Estate of Sampson*, 838 N.W.2d 663 (Iowa 2013)). *Sampson* concerns only *Ritz*’s probate holding, that an estate may be reopened under Iowa Code §633.489 to administer newly discovered property; it declined to apply that rule to an attempt to redistribute property already disposed of in the final settlement. The finders-law discussion in *Ritz* is unaffected.

- **Possession and first claim.** Lawyers know the rule from *Armory v. Delamirie* (K.B. 1722): a finder’s title is good against everyone but the true owner. When two people claim the same found object, a court may split it: in *Popov v. Hayashi*, 2002 WL 31833731 (Cal. Super. Ct. Dec. 18, 2002), the fan who first got a grip on a record home-run ball and the fan who ended up with it were given equal, undivided interests, and the ball was sold. Idaho’s appellate court gave buried gold coins to the landowner over the excavator who found them. *Corliss v. Wenner*, 136 Idaho 417, 34 P.3d 1100 (Ct. App. 2001).
- **Treasure trove** (gold, silver, currency concealed by an unknown owner): recognized in some states; unlikely to apply to craft debris.
- **State statutes** often require finders to report found property to police and allow the finder to claim it after a period if the owner does not; California’s lost-property statute (Cal. Civ. Code §§2080-2080.10) and New York’s (N.Y. Pers. Prop. Law §§251-258) are examples. Check the statute of the state where the find occurred before anyone moves the material.

3. Meteorite precedent

- *Goddard v. Winchell* (Iowa 1892): a meteorite that fell on land and became embedded belonged to the landowner, who prevailed over the finder because the meteorite became part of the soil.
- *Oregon Iron Co. v. Hughes* (Or. 1905): the Willamette meteorite belonged to the landowner, and the neighbor who moved it acquired no title.
- *Karlsson v. Sherman*, 720 F. Supp. 3d 886 (C.D. Cal. 2024): in a dispute over two .45 caliber pistols made of meteorite ore, the court held that an auction house’s perfected security interest as consignee had priority over the competing ownership claims, and the remaining title claims between the parties were resolved in later rulings (2024 WL 2209796 (C.D. Cal. Apr. 10, 2024)). The case shows that once extraterrestrial material enters commerce, its ownership is decided under ordinary contract and UCC Article 9 rules, without regard to where the material came from.
- **Federal policy:** BLM permits casual collection of small quantities of meteorites on public lands for non-commercial purposes and requires permits for others; meteorites on National Park lands may not be collected (National Park System: 36 C.F.R. §2.1(a)(1) prohibits “[p]ossessing, destroying, injuring, defacing, removing, digging, or disturbing from its natural state” paleontological specimens, cultural or archeological resources, and mineral resources). BLM Instruction Memorandum 2012-182 confirms casual collection without a permit under 43 C.F.R. §8365.1-5: surface collection only, up to what can be hand-carried

and no more than ten pounds per person per year, for personal use (no sale or barter); closed in developed recreation sites, certain National Landscape Conservation System units, wilderness, and areas closed by land use plans; scientific collection requires an Antiquities Act permit, and specimens remain BLM property; commercial collection requires a FLPMA permit.

The meteorite cases rest on the theory that natural objects arriving on land become part of it. A crafted object is different (it was made and, arguably, owned), but if no owner can claim it, the landowner rule is the natural default.

3.1 Moon rocks: the closest real precedent

The government has recovered extraterrestrial material from private hands before. A lunar sample and plaque given by the United States to Honduras were found in private hands in the United States; the government sued in rem and the court found probable cause that they had been stolen, so they were forfeited. *United States v. One Lucite Ball Containing Lunar Material*, 252 F. Supp. 2d 1367 (S.D. Fla. 2003). In another case NASA's inspector general set up a sting to seize a small moon-rock paperweight from a widow who wanted to sell it; the Ninth Circuit held that a jury could find her detention unreasonably prolonged and degrading. *Davis v. United States*, 854 F.3d 594 (9th Cir. 2017). Together they show the two tools the government uses (forfeiture of material it claims, and seizure in an investigation) and the limit on the second: the Fourth Amendment still governs how an investigation is carried out.

3.2 Space resources

By statute a U.S. citizen engaged in commercial recovery of a space resource “shall be entitled to any asteroid resource or space resource obtained, including to possess, own, transport, use, and sell” it (51 U.S.C. §51303), and the Artemis Accords (2020) take the position that extracting space resources is not national appropriation under the Outer Space Treaty. The statute covers resources extracted in space, not objects that arrive on Earth, but it shows that U.S. law recognizes private ownership of extraterrestrial material.

4. Sovereign claims

- **United States property.** Government property is not abandoned through lapse of time or nonuse; abandonment requires express action by an authorized official. The Sunken Military Craft Act codifies this for U.S. and foreign military craft and aircraft, including wrecks, and prohibits disturbance without permission. Crashed U.S. military aircraft on land are likewise government property.
- **Foreign sovereigns.** Foreign state wrecks are protected by sovereign immunity under the FSIA and by the express-abandonment rule (*Sea Hunt*, involving Spanish frigates; *Odyssey*, involving the Spanish frigate *Mercedes*; *Global Marine*, involving French vessels).
- **Non-human craft.** No current law treats a non-human civilization as a sovereign for these purposes (Issue F1, F5). If the government recovered a craft, it would likely assert possession and ownership by occupation or capture; if a private party found it first on private land, the landowner would have the stronger claim absent a statute, subject to condemnation.

5. Other legal constraints on holders

- **Export controls:** transferring material or technical data abroad may require licenses if it is a defense article or controlled item ([Issue A5](#)).
- **Classification:** privately found material is not classified, but information the government provides about it may be.
- **Hazardous materials:** radioactive or hazardous material is subject to NRC, DOE, EPA, and DOT rules.
- **Reporting:** no general federal duty to report found UAP material exists; AARO accepts public reports.

6. Practice points

- Document the find: date, location (GPS), photographs in situ, witnesses, landowner identity and permission.
- Determine land status (private, state, tribal, federal); obtain landowner's written assignment if the finder is not the landowner.
- Do not disturb material on federal land without authorization.
- Preserve chain of custody; avoid destructive testing until ownership and analysis plans are settled.
- Expect a government request; respond under [Form E1-1](#).