The Samoan people are Polynesians whose ancestors settled the archipelago about 3,000 years ago. The people who brought the Lapita Cultural Complex to the Samoan archipelago were seafarers who had occupied islands at least as far west as the Admiralties off the north shore of New Guinea. Archaeological sites dating from the early period of occupation are primarily habitation sites and are expected to be mostly coastal (e.g., Kirch & Hunt eds. 1993; Clark & Michlovic 1996). Material remains in these sites can include some or all of the following: pottery (the classic Lapita pottery is decorated with motifs impressed into the clay with dentate stamps), basalt flakes and tools, volcanic glass, shell fishhooks and tools for their manufacture, shell ornaments, and faunal remains. The colonizers of these islands brought domesticated pigs, dogs and chickens with them, and probably also the Polynesian rat (Rattus exulans). Domesticated plants were transported for cultivation. This period is represented in American Samoa by deeply stratified archaeological sites such as To'aga on Ofu (Kirch & Hunt eds. 1993) and 'Aoa on Tutuila (Clark & Michlovic 1996). While early sites on some other islands in Polynesia are now beneath water (e.g., the Mulifanua Lapita Pottery site on 'Upolu [Green & Davidson 1967]), the evidence to date indicates that early sites in American Samoa will be found on the shores of prehistoric embankments that have subsequently filled in with sand. No sites from this period are listed on the National Register, although the two mentioned above both meet National Register Criteria A and D. Archaeological sites representing the early occupation of Samoa will be targeted for future National Register nominations.

It has been conventionally accepted that pottery manufacture ceased in Samoa sometime shortly after A.D. 300 (see Clark & Michlovic 1996 for a summary of the conventional view; A.D. 800 is proposed in Kirch & Hunt eds. 1993). However, recent research by Clark in ‘Aoa valley has revealed pottery in stratigraphic contexts dating as late as the 16th century (Clark & Michlovic 1996). This might explain why there was an apparent “dark ages” in Samoan prehistory - pottery bearing sites were all assumed to date to the earliest period of Samoan prehistory and hence charcoal was often not collected from upper pottery bearing deposits for dating. Therefore the period between about A.D. 300 and 1000 requires further definition in the study of Samoan prehistory before typical site types can be discussed. One site type that was
probably utilized during this period are the stone quarries. To date 4 large and about 6 smaller quarries have been identified on Tutuila Island. One of the large quarries, Tatagamatau, is listed on the National Register and two others are being nominated. Basalt from Tutuila has been found in Taumako, Tokelau, Fiji, Western Samoa, the Manu'a Islands (Best et al. 1992) and the Cook Islands (Walter 1990; Kirch & Weisler pers. comm. 1994). The quarries continued to be utilized into the early historic period, when iron tools introduced by Europeans began to replace the locally made stone tools. One of the significant stone tool type manufactured from basalt extracted from these quarries were adzes. Large quantities of basalt debris have been found in various village sites (e.g., Maloata [Ayers & Eisler 1987] and Tulauta [Frost 1978; Clark 1980; Brophy 1986]). Polishing the adzes was a final step in their production; large basalt boulders were used for this finishing. Boulders used for this activity generally have smooth dish-shaped concave areas on them and sometimes grooves in which the adz bits were sharpened. These boulders are found in archaeological sites (such as Maloata and Tulauta), in streams, and elsewhere on the island landscape. Grinding stones have been found in the Manu'a islands. No quarries have been identified in Manu'a, though researchers have looked.

Most of the prehistoric surface remains in American Samoa date to the later period of Samoan prehistory. During this period, warfare over titled positions on the islands of Western Samoa influenced events on Tutuila. Tutuila was at times under the jurisdiction of the eastern districts of 'Upolu, and Tutuilians may have been required by chiefs on 'Upolu to fight in their wars. Warfare was also prevalent among the Manu'a islands. Oral traditions in the Manu'a islands refer to leaders of islands to the west (Fiji, Western Samoa, etc.) visiting Manu'a on sometimes hostile missions. Defensive fortification sites, often located high on ridges and mountains, are characteristic of this period. These fortifications were used as refuges to which those individuals not directly involved moved and where the warriors retreated when necessary (Williams 1984). A large defensive wall on the Tafuna Plain, Tutuila Island, is listed on the National Register, and there are plans to nominate a fortification site on Ofu Island. When not at war in later prehistory Samoans lived in villages; in American Samoa these were mostly in coastal areas. Many of these villages are still occupied today. In some cases the remains are still visible on the surface while in other places the evidence of prehistoric use is all below the ground surface. The late prehistoric sites at Maloata (Ayers & Eisler 1987) and Fagafalete Bay (Frost 1978), both on Tutuila, and Faga on Ta'u, are village sites from this time period that are being nominated to the National Register. The ideal layout of a Samoan village was a central open space, called a malae, surrounded by meeting houses, chiefs' houses, other residences and cooking houses. Quarries continued to be used during this time period. The final prominent site type from late prehistory are tia seu lupe, called star mounds in English. These mounds were usually constructed of stone, had one or more rays, and were used for the sport of pigeon catching by chiefs. No star mounds have been nominated to the National Register to date, though they are eligible.

The first recorded European contact occurred in 1722, when Dutch navigator Jacob Roggeveen sighted several of the islands. He was followed by French explorers Louis-Antoine
de Bougainville in 1768 and Jean-François de La Pérouse in 1787. A monument in Aasu, Massacre Bay, to the 12 members of La Pérouse's crew who were killed there, is on the National Register. The first European Christian missionary, Englishman John Williams of the London Missionary Society, arrived in 1830. He and his followers had a profound impact on the Samoans and their culture. The National Register sites Atauloma Girl's School and Fagalele Boy's School at the western end of Tutuila were built by the LMS for the education of Samoan children in Christian life. Other Pacific Islanders came to Samoa as missionaries during this period (e.g., Society and Cook Islanders working with the London Missionary Society, Tongans working with the Methodists). European traders and military personnel also affected Samoans.

Historic properties in American Samoa that are associated with Euro-Americans, both military (discussed below) and otherwise, are usually distinctive in their use of some sort of concrete materials. Historic properties from the last two centuries that are associated primarily with Samoans tend to be very much like prehistoric Samoan remains. Fortifications, ceased to be used once the European powers eliminated local warfare. Quarries were abandoned with the introduction of metal tools, and star mounds ceased to be used due to the influence of the missionaries; however, villages retained their basic structure.

When the Samoan Islands were partitioned according to the provisions of the Tripartite Convention in 1899, the United States acquired the eastern islands, while Germany took control of 'Upolu, Savai'i, Manono and Apolima, whose total area is 1,120 square miles. These islands now comprise the Independent State of Western Samoa, which New Zealand forces wrested from the Germans in 1914, maintaining control of them until 1962.

Under U.S. Navy control from 1900 to 1951, American Samoa was initially a coaling station for the fleet in the Age of Steam. During World War II, the "U.S. Naval Station Tutuila", now a Historic District listed on the National Register, was the headquarters of the Samoan Defense Group, which included several adjacent island groups, and was the largest of the Pacific defense groups. As the war moved north and west, American Samoa became a strategic backwater. Historic properties from World War II are found throughout the islands in the form of military facilities such as medical facilities, the Tafuna Air Base, the Marine Training facility in Leone, and pillboxes that dot the coastlines. In the postwar era, American Samoa's military importance continued to decline, and in 1951, the Territory was transferred to the Department of the Interior, under whose control it remains. In 1954 the Van Camp Seafood Co. of California opened a cannery on the eastern shore of Pago Bay, followed some years later by Starkist Inc. The canneries make significant contributions to the economy of American Samoa and employment opportunities draw people from Western Samoa. The fishing industry has also involved other minority groups, such as Japanese and Korean fishermen. From 1951 until 1977, Territorial Governors were appointed by the Secretary of the Interior; since 1977, they have been elected by universal suffrage.