

Archeology and Local History

*J. C. Harrington**

It is becoming more and more evident that archeology no longer limits its interests and activities to the study of pre-historic peoples or to ancient civilizations that have produced great works of art and architecture. Experience in this country over the past fifteen or twenty years has demonstrated quite convincingly that the methods and techniques of archeology can be applied advantageously to the field of local history. This has come about, I believe, not only because archeologists have been willing to enter new fields, but also because the interests of local history have broadened. Archeology cannot contribute much to a study of genealogy, but local history groups have certainly advanced far beyond the narrower objectives of genealogical societies.

It is surprising that historians in the United States have been so slow in making use of this obvious historical tool, for in European countries, especially Great Britain, historians and archeologists have been working hand in hand for a long time. This has been especially noticable in their county "antiquarian" societies.

In my talk to you today I am for the most part, going to be strictly practical and discuss with you how you might go about getting some digging done when and if you decide you can use more information than you can find in books, letters, deeds, and other historical standbys. I am not going to try to sell you on the advantages of tackling local history with a pick and shovel, for I am confident that all of you are acquainted with the accomplishments and possibilities of archeological research in the study of American history.

I would like nothing better than to tell you about some of these projects—the recent work at the site of the iron furnace at Saugus; the work on Pilgrim plantation sites around Plymouth; the important information on the era of westward expansion that is coming to light from combined archeological and historical research in the Missouri River

* J. C. Harrington is regional archaeologist of the National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior. He is stationed in Region One, with headquarters at Richmond, Virginia. He has worked extensively in that state and read this paper at the annual meeting of the American Association for State and Local History.

basin and other sections of the west and northwest; and I would like particularly to describe the contributions that have been made by archeologists in the study of the Spanish, French, and English colonial periods. Then there are the numerous projects connected with the restoration of historic structures; projects, by the way, that are especially susceptible to the application of archeological procedures. Since I will not be able to discuss any of these projects associated with historic house restoration, I want to emphasize that the contributions of archeology in this particular field have furnished much more information of historical interest than just the reconstruction data.

To point up some of the problems, more than to show accomplishments, I will take time to describe briefly one example—the work carried on by the National Park Service over the past four years at Fort Raleigh on Roanoke Island, North Carolina. Although we have completed the project there with a reconstruction of the original fort, this was not the original objective. In fact, when we started the work in 1947, we had no idea that reconstruction would be at all possible or desirable. Our primary aims were to locate and identify the site and to add any information possible to the scant documentary sources as to the layout of the settlement, types of structures built, and other facts concerning the history of this first English colony. There were no maps or drawings dating from the period of the settlement and no written descriptions. In fact, we were not at all certain that we were exploring the actual site where the Raleigh colonists settled.

It was not entirely a matter of working in the dark, for there did exist a small rise of ground which tradition had long held to be the site of the "Citie of Raleigh in Virginia." During the first season, funds were inadequate to carry out a large-scale excavation, so it was important that every trench be so placed that it would be most apt to produce tangible results. The first thing we did was to excavate an exploratory trench, five feet wide, straight across one edge of the traditional fort site. Tradition proved to be right. Our first trench cut across two old ditches, which further exploring proved beyond a doubt to be the remains of an old earthwork.

The next question was to determine whether these were remains of the 1585 fort, or a later defensive work, possibly

even a Civil War fort, of which there are several nearby. We were prejudiced against accepting this immediately as the 1585 fort, both because of the usual "scientific caution" for which archeologists are famous, and because we had always conceived of Fort Raleigh as having been a rugged structure of immense logs set upright in the ground, rather than a simple earthwork.

We recognized that one definite means of identification would be the finding of objects of the Elizabethan period in such a position that their presence could only be explained by the acceptance of this ditch as part of the original fort. Archeologists, of course, depend a lot on artifacts. Our first season's work, however, failed to discover such objects, but we did uncover enough of the original fort ditch to enable us to determine the approximate size and shape of the earthwork. When plotted on paper the fort outline strongly resembled the earthwork built by Ralph Lane on the island of Puerto Rico where the colonists stopped on their way to Roanoke Island. By good fortune, this Puerto Rican fort was sketched by one of the colonists and the drawing is preserved to this day.

The next season, 1948, we worked out the shape of the fort more exactly and even located its principal entrance. It was now apparent that this was actually the fort built by the Raleigh colonists for it was almost identical in plan to the one at Puerto Rico. Moreover, it was typically medieval in form, especially in the absence of conventional bastions which became so systematized and stylized in defensive works of this nature soon after this time. The point of real interest is that the identification came about, not from direct archeological evidence, but from the fortunate opportunity for combining archeological information with historical knowledge.

The earthwork erected on Roanoke Island in 1585 proved to be a small defensive work with an open space inside only about fifty feet square. The ditch, which entirely surrounded the fort, except at the two entrances, was roughly five feet deep and ten feet wide at the ground level. With the shape and orientation of the fort determined, we were then in a better position to look for remains of the settlement itself. Exploration within a reasonable distance of the fort has

thus far failed to uncover any remains which indicate the presence of habitations, although we have run some 4100 feet of test trenches. Either the remains were too superficial to have survived through the years, or we have not yet explored the proper area.

The final step in the study of the fort, and one that was carried out primarily for interpretive purposes, was its complete excavation and reconstruction. Fairly authentic reconstruction was possible because the exact shape of the ditch, as originally dug when the fort was built, could be determined. First of all the entire area within the ditch line was carefully excavated, revealing important information concerning the fort's construction and providing objects of the period. The earth that had accumulated in the fort ditch through the years was then removed and thrown up to form a parapet, much as the colonists had done in 1585.

The earlier identification of the fort from its peculiar outline was substantiated by discovery of several objects definitely of the period of the fort's construction. In addition to information about the fort, the excavations provided other facts of interest and value. For example, it was determined that the sand dunes lying between the fort and the shore of the sound had been deposited since the fort was built. This helps materially in explaining the fort's apparent unmilitary position behind a ridge which would have furnished perfect protection for any enemy landing party. Information of this type, as well as the fort's reconstruction, required extremely painstaking excavating and interpretation of the archeological evidence. The net results include an informative and dramatic field exhibit and much new information concerning the first English settlement in America.

You are probably more interested in some of the practical problems encountered in a project of this type than in the results, interesting as they are. I would say that this was a small sized project, as far as work of this type goes. Even so, it represents an investment that would be out of reach of many local history groups.

The work, including the test trenching search for the area of habitation, was carried on during three field seasons, each lasting from two to three months. Exclusive of the work of final shaping and stabilizing the reconstructed fort

and the test trenching outside the fort site, some 420 man-days of labor were used in the archeological explorations at the fort site itself. Added to this was the cost of technical archeological supervision and necessary supplies.

We found that a crew of from six to eight men could be worked to best advantage on a project of this nature. During the later stages of excavating, when considerable dirt had to be moved to shape up the parapets, the crew was increased to around ten men.

Now let us face the real problem of how a local history group can, and should, go about a project of this sort. The problem, in fact, may be even more critical when the project is a small one, for it is often more difficult to get a small job done than a large one. It is neither easy to raise funds for a small project, nor to secure competent supervision, both of which are primary essentials for any excavation. Many local history projects, important as they are in themselves, are not of a nature that their sponsors can tap the resources of large research institutions, the Federal government, or philanthropically inclined individuals.

I could spend an hour admonishing you not to try to do the job without the services of a trained archeologist. Even if I were to launch upon such a discourse, you could not accuse me of trying to keep the plums for the profession, for there are many more projects waiting to be done than there are archeologists to do them. The practical difficulty lies in the fact that the archeological profession is not like architecture and most other technical professions from which you can secure specified technical services no matter how large or how small your needs may be. I doubt if even the classified directory for New York City carries a listing for "Archeologists."

Another, and even more serious problem, is that there are relatively few archeologists with experience in this sort of work, and essentially none who have had the specialized academic training that would give them the necessary background. Most archeological students in this country do their academic work in the general field of anthropology, having a course or so in archeological methods and various courses on prehistoric cultures. Others receive highly specialized

training in the Oriental and Classical fields, but none have academic training which qualifies them to excavate and interpret an early nineteenth century frontier settlement, a Revolutionary War earthwork, a Colonial house site, or a seventeenth century Jesuit mission site.

Obviously, some means must be found for training enough men in the field of historic site archeology to meet the growing demand for this type of research. There will be no candidates for these college courses, however, until there are year-around positions available. But this is a broader problem than the one we started out to discuss, and you are not necessarily concerned as individuals. As a group, however, it is something that the American Association for State and Local History should concern itself with.

Confronted with this despairing picture, what is your course when you have an excavating project to get done? Again, I am taking for granted that you have decided where you are going and why you are going there, and that you have come to the conclusion, improperly or not, that your problem calls for some archeology.

Possibly this discussion will be more valuable if we use a hypothetical example, and let us take for this purpose a traditional site of an old pottery kiln.

You have, we will say, decided that, since pottery making has long been a key industry in your community, it would be well to learn all you can about the presumably earliest factory, and to develop the site, if feasible, as a supplement to related exhibits in your local historical museum.

First of all you will need some money. If I knew something about your project, I could tell you approximately how much money you would need, but I am not sufficiently clairvoyant to tell you where you can get it. But the first step, even before you consider the cost of excavating and development, is to gather together all available information you possibly can concerning the site, and then systematically assemble the data into a comprehensive report. This material should include not only that dealing with the physical history of the factory, but also information concerning the operation itself; the people who operated it; the products made there; how they were made; the workmen who made them; disposition of the products; and other pertinent data.

Compilation of this material will be needed in planning your archeological program; in fact, it is a requisite to making your initial decision as to whether an archeological program should be considered. The really important use of this compilation of documentary material will come during the excavating and the interpretation of the archeological finds.

Experience has shown that you will seldom, if ever, have the necessary information already assembled, although you may have some fine studies and publications having to do with the site under consideration. No single study is likely, however, to be sufficiently broad in its approach to meet the present needs.

This task of assembling and coordinating pertinent documentary material can often be carried out by members of your local society, either as a joint project, with competent historical editing, or by an individual, if one can be found with the time, interest, and ability. Do not leave this documentary study for the archeologist to do. He, and you too, will be anxious to get at the digging, and he will be too busy then to do any library research. Besides, you must have this historical study at hand as a basis for planning the archeologist's project.

The next step is to secure some good professional advice. If there is any one time in your entire project when you need good, sound, experienced advice, now is that time. This advice should cost you nothing, except possible disillusionment and exasperation. The counsel you are looking for at this point is not how to excavate—that will come later; but you need to know the answers to some fundamental questions: Is the idea of excavating the site feasible? How much will it cost? How should the project be organized? How can it be accomplished? Your state archeologist, if you have one, might well be the first person to see, or there may be a qualified archeologist in your community or in a nearby university. But, by all means, get the best possible professional help at this point.

As to the expense of excavating, the two major costs are technical supervision and labor. Local societies often ask if it is not possible to offset the high labor costs by voluntary help from members of the society. Of course this is feasible under some circumstances, if your members are

willing to work. Excavating is no picnic, and it is usually not practicable to carry on a project as a week-end activity. Students can often be employed during the summer at nominal cost, which is preferable to hit-and-miss voluntary labor. And never, of course, underestimate the ability of women in this respect.

But no matter how successful you are in securing voluntary labor, I advise that you plan, if at all possible, on providing a basic crew of hired laborers, say a minimum of two, to do the heavier work, such as wheeling dirt. Also, be sure to save back enough money in your account to take care of backfilling and final clean-up, because archeology suddenly becomes very tedious and tiresome when there is nothing left but backfilling.

There are other ways in which you can put local volunteers to work advantageously. Draftsmen and engineers can help in mapping the site and setting the reference stakes, both of which should be completed before the excavating begins. They can also help in recording finds, preparing measured drawings of structural remains, and making photos and drawings for the final report. The cleaning and cataloguing of excavated objects can be done by society members, and with a minimum of supervision.

Equipment needs are not great, and for a relatively small job they can usually be met within the community. A few supplies may have to be purchased, such as photographic film, paper sacks, special preservatives, and possibly certain specialized tools. Then there will be the cost of photographic processing, and other incidentals. All told, these expenses can be kept relatively low without jeopardizing the results of the work.

Your most difficult problem will probably be the securing of a competent supervisor. You occasionally hear of a baby being born in a taxi cab, but at least the mother presumably is headed for the hospital. Emergencies also arise in our field, although rarely, when an inexperienced layman has, so to speak, to deliver the archeological baby; but, as with childbirth, these matters can best be put in the hands of a trained and experienced specialist.

It is easy to say, "Hire a specialist." But, as I indicated earlier, this is seldom possible on a small project that will

last only a few weeks, and for which funds are often limited. If the work can be done during the summer, you can usually employ a graduate student, but he will probably lack both the training and experience desired for the job. It is not just knowing the fundamental field techniques that is important, but the supervisor should preferably have had some experience with basic historical research and a knowledge of the cultural remains likely to be encountered in the course of the excavating.

If the project is primarily that of uncovering remains of a building for purposes of reconstruction, then I am rather of the opinion you might do better with an architectural student than an inexperienced archeological student. He would not know the tricks of archeology, but he would at least know something about the things he would uncover. The important thing is, no matter whom you get for this job, make certain that he can give full time supervision to the work. An alert, intelligent person can learn quickly, but he cannot learn how to excavate from behind an office desk; nor can even the most experienced man properly direct an excavation *in absentia*.

The technical supervisor's responsibility does not end with the backfilling of the last trench; nor does yours as the sponsoring agency. The excavated objects must be cleaned and catalogued and field notes and drawings have to be put in shape as part of the permanent record. Then there is the final responsibility of a good report. This may necessitate further library research or work with museum collections. It is best to allow a minimum of three months post-season work on the part of the archeologist for every month of field work, and a safer estimate would be six months.

Now, if you are determined to do your digging and cannot employ a fully qualified archeologist for the immediate supervision, then you should make sure that you can fall back on an experienced archeologist for periodic consultation. He should be available for preliminary discussion with the full time supervisor and with members of the society for working out the details of the excavating, recording, laboratory processing, preservation and stabilization of structural remains, preparation of reports, and other procedures. He should be consulted occasionally as the work progresses, preferably at

the site. But if that is not practicable, the supervisor can load up his field records and go to the consultant for a conference. Almost any responsible archeologist, if he is not away on an expedition of his own, would be willing to contribute this much, and even more, to a local project.

In a nutshell, then, this is what you should plan for if you decide within your local society that you would like to embark on an archeological project at an historic site:

- (1) Assemble all readily available documentary data relating to the site and prepare a well-organized report.
- (2) Consult a reliable, experienced archeologist, who can tell you how much the project will cost and how to go about getting it done.
- (3) Based upon this advice, coupled with good, practical common sense on your own part, secure necessary funds and set up your project. Funds should be sufficient to provide full time technical supervision, adequate recordation, good photographs, laboratory processing and adequate storage of artifacts and records, care of exposed remains, backfilling and clean-up, and the preparation of a final report. These are "musts." You should also have enough money to hire a small labor crew, even if volunteer help is available.
- (4) Now go ahead and do the job as thoroughly and scientifically and scholarly as you possibly can. Lean heavily on advice and consultation from men with the widest experience in this field. Plan the job so that there is the least possible chance of having to terminate it before it is finished; and it is not finished until the artifacts and exposed remains are taken care of and the final report is written.

Archeology, when properly done, can contribute a great deal to local history. It is of particular value in securing knowledge about specific sites, whether the objective is restoration or simply learning more about the physical history and appearance of the site, and about the people who lived or worked there and the things they had and used. But archeology is not just digging, nor is it simply a means of

acquiring museum objects; it is a useful historical tool. It has come to have a very definite place in historical research, but its use as an adjunct to American history is relatively new and it has a long way to go before it can be fully and adequately utilized.

This does not mean, however, that we must hold up on this type of research. We are bound to lose some data from improper digging and through lack of adequately trained men, but if we recognize the hazards and do all we can to meet them as soundly and competently as possible, then this new historical tool will become increasingly valuable to the students of local history.

The following books will be found helpful in developing field methods: R. J. C. Atkinson, *Field Archaeology* (Methuen & Co., Ltd., London, 1946); William L. Calver and Reginald P. Bolton, *History Written with Pick and Shovel* (New York Historical Society, New York, 1950); Robert F. Heizer, *A Manual of Archaeological Field Methods* (National Press, Millbrae, California, 1950); National Research Council, *Guide Leaflet for Amateur Archaeologists* (Reprint and Circular Series No. 93, Washington, D.C., 1930); Clark Wissler, *State and Local Archaeological Surveys; Suggestions in Method and Technique* (Iowa State Historical Society, Iowa City, 1923).