

A TEN-MINUTE HISTORY OF EVERYTHING OR 30 YEARS OF HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN CALIFORNIA

ADRIAN PRAETZELLIS

Academic field schools aside, the history of historical archaeology in California over the last 30 years is largely a product of CRM. As the opposition of Native peoples here and worldwide has led to a decline in the excavation of prehistoric sites, historical archaeology has become the Next Big Thing. Given this context, the interpretive/scientific potential of CRM-driven historical archaeology is huge, but dangers lurk in the shadows.

Once Upon a Time...I'm going to tell a simple tale. A tale of beginnings. A tale of how CRM-based historical archaeology in California hauled itself out of the primordial mud, grew legs, began to walk on land, and what it found there.

In the beginning, the State legislature created the California Environmental Quality Act [CEQA] and its implementing regulations. And it was good. But it wasn't that good. Until the 1972 case *Friends of Mammoth vs. Mono County* the regulations only covered government projects. After that ruling, private developments were included. Although some public agencies required archaeological surveys in the early and mid-1970s, it wasn't until 1977 that the judge in *Society for California Archaeology v. Butte County* ruled unequivocally that archaeology was indeed covered under CEQA.

Mary Praetzellis and I were awarded our first contract to do archaeology in 1976 by the Sonoma County Water Agency. At the time, we worked under the rules known as CEQA Appendix K that specified a site had to be over 100 years old to be what it termed an "important archaeological resource." The problem was twofold: first, what was not qualified to be important this year could be eligible next year; and second, in the 1970s and 80s, a large slab of the 19th-century was apparently out of bounds to archaeological research. At the time, not too many California archaeologists were actually interested in historical archaeology so the grumbling was at a fairly low volume. We worked around the issue the best we could by making that case that this or that site was unbelievably wonderful and "unique."

There were three other influences, these from broader American culture that gave historical archaeology a push in the mid- and late-1970s: the civil rights movement, the New Social History, and the nation's bi-centennial. For those who weren't there I'd point out that the first two had a profound influence on how the latter was celebrated. The idea that America was not simply a cultural melting pot grew due to the efforts of New Social Historians of the 1960s and '70s. At the same time, historical archaeologists were pointing out that the archaeological record is intrinsically more democratic than historical documents—that those who left few written records were still represented in the ground by the objects they had used in life. Far from being a celebration of dead white men, the bi-centennial gave a huge boost to archaeologies of class and of ethnicity. And all of a sudden it was respectable, even commendable, to study those whom traditional history had ignored. Social historians—and historical archaeologists, too—came front and center to give depth and a certain scholarly legitimacy to this emerging paradigm, which insisted that cultural diversity had always existed within American society. The message we put out was that it's possible to honor difference without abandoning the principles of E Pluribus Unum and national unity. And I would venture that the concept is still mighty relevant today.

HISTORIC AND HISTORIC-AL ARCHAEOLOGIES

This change in cultural attitudes toward the very nature of American history affected the on-going debate about what this fledgling sub-discipline was

going to be called (Schuyler 1978). Some people favored the term “historic sites archaeology” or simply “historic archaeology.” Others pointed out that these terms flew in the face of the democratizing goals of the field that sought to give a voice to the unrepresented. “Historic archaeology,” they pointed out, harked back to an era when history was all about the great men and their momentous doings at famous, “historic” places. But the rival term, “historic-al archaeology,” which eventually won out, was an equally strong statement about the goals of the new field whose practitioners were going to tell everyone’s story. Now, some English majors don’t care for the rather jarring noise when the words “prehistoric and historical archaeology” are used in the same sentence. They would like to homogenize the word endings for a smoother sound. The trouble is that “historical” and “historic” aren’t synonymous when put before the word “archaeology.” There’s real meaning in the distinction.

This was the, ahem, historical context in which the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation came out with its regulations for the Section 106 process, which changed everything in 1982. Although the National Register of Historic Places’ 50-year eligibility rule had been in effect for years, the new regulations provided the process both structure and teeth. The Council’s new regulations spelled out federal agencies’ responsibilities as well as the unspeakable consequences of non-compliance. Suddenly, the game had changed—at least on federal projects.

I will now take a side road and give a couple of random thoughts about the state of California historical archaeology when I first planted my trowel in a California historic-era site in 1974. Having spent the previous years in the UK learning how to dig stratigraphically, I was... surprised to find that stratified archaeological sites were routinely dug using arbitrary 10-centimeter levels. Now, Jim Bennyhoff had worked with Robert Heizer on the Sonoma Barracks site in the early 1950s, I asked Jim about it and he explained it this way: Since almost all California archaeologists were prehistorians and most prehistoric sites aren’t physically stratified, few people, he said, had the skill to dig in layers. Also (and this one was even more telling) artifacts were thought of as having intrinsic importance over and above their stratigraphic context. It was enough for some purposes—such as description, classification, and dating—to be able to say that this collection came from this site. The idea that one might want to interpret particular contexts within the site to reconstruct the events that went on there wasn’t so important.

Of course, this is a huge generalization and there were several exceptions, such as Treganza, an excellent excavator who left clear and complete records. However, outside clearly “historic” locations such as Fort Ross, the missions, and so on, where the goal was to record site structure for the purpose of reconstructing buildings, precedence was given, as Bennyhoff said, to the collection of artifacts themselves.

Americanist archaeology of the 1970s was in the middle of a brazen flirtation with Science. Not to be left out, historical archaeology developed its own little contribution in the form of Stanley South’s “Pattern Recognition” approach (South 1977). It can be argued that Pattern Recognition needs archaeological context hardly at all and site history even less—with, in my opinion, predictably uninteresting results. Since in Pattern Recognition the site (not the layer or feature) was the basic unit of analysis, all one needed in order to apply South’s method was a collection of artifacts from a site. Add this to an archaeological climate in North America that was well used to the study of decontextualized artifacts for the purposes of constructing chronology and seriation, and we arrive at a situation in which more focus was placed on the objects themselves than on the stratigraphic context of their discovery and on their meaning to the people who used them.

The reductionist trend was reflected in the way we organized our excavation reports. There’d be chapters on methods and history, a couple of pages on what it might mean, and some long, long appendices by experts on ceramics, glass, and food bone who, knowing more about their materials than the site they came from, gave us lists of things. We had become very good at breaking everything apart, but as for reassembling it into a coherent story... well, we’d leave that to those mysterious “future researchers.” In fact, we felt that there just wasn’t any time for detailed interpretation. With the next endangered site teetering on the edge of destruction our job was to rescue “the data” so they’d be available for the future; interpretation could wait. With the perspective of hindsight, I believe this was and continues to be a mistake. And worse; it’s a convenient fiction that the next generation will, I hope, leave in the past.

In the 1970s important historic-era sites were being destroyed because those in authority just couldn’t see the point. Paradoxically, today we see public agencies expend large sums of cash on meaningless scatters of banged-up 20th-century litter

that should be written off with a half-page memo. For as archaeology has become just another element of government regulation, CRM practitioners at every level have become more concerned with process and procedure than with achieving outcomes that are both sensible and proportional. Decent sites continue to go under while odds and sods deservedly dumped by the side of the road are lovingly bagged and tagged. Our archaeological collections facilities are bursting at the seams and I haven't noticed hoards of researchers demanding to reanalyze old collections. Yet at \$1000 per box you'd think that every bottle, nail, and brick was an item of cultural patrimony. And because historical archaeology has the potential to produce heretofore unimaginable quantities of artifacts, I predict that this kind of artifact fetishism is going to lead a variety of problems down the road.

DIGGING OUR OWN HOLE

Just a few weeks ago we received a series of frantic phone messages from a certain San Francisco journalist whose specialty is uncovering government waste and corruption. He had heard that Sonoma State University had allowed 19th-century artifacts from an archaeological site in San Francisco to be destroyed and wanted to know how this could be. He'd also learned that we had cleaned, marked, and studied similar artifacts and proposed to charge the State to curate them in perpetuity. He wanted to know how, with the largest State budgetary deficit in history, such a thing could come to pass. I didn't return his calls, and a political scandal later in the week happily caused him to lose interest. What a relief, for I'd visualized my pension evaporating with the appearance of the next day's headlines:

“PROF DUMPSTERS SF HISTORY”

or just as likely...

“THE \$1000 BOX OF BRICKS”

It was a classic Catch-22. The reporter would have screwed me to the wall whatever I said. Had I been unfortunate enough to get caught on the phone, I would have tried to convince him that not every artifact is important and that it was perfectly acceptable for some to get destroyed while others, which were physically identical, would be pored over by specialists and then tucked away in a box. I doubt that I would have been successful.

There are unfriendly forces out there and our profession can't afford to be smug just because

historical archaeology has become the next Big Thing. So let's commit to vigorously distinguishing between sites and materials that have discernable research potential and those that don't. And more importantly, let's employ these contextualized artifacts to make coherent and interesting statements about people who lived in the past, and not pass this responsibility along as the archaeological contribution to the national debt.

The activists behind those early lawsuits gave us the legal means to do our work and make a living at it. But it was the men and women who set us on the path of “historic-al” archaeology, an archaeology about real people, they gave us the vision.

Endnotes

This Plenary Session paper was intended as a retrospective on California archaeology. The author had been asked by the SCA Program Chair to describe the development of historical archaeology in the state over the past 30 years—to which he might have added “while standing on one leg.” The original presentation was clocked at 12 minutes.

REFERENCES CITED

Schulyer, Robert L.
1978 Historical and Historic Sites Archaeology as Anthropology. Pp. 27-32 in Robert L. Schuyler (ed.) *Historical Archaeology: A Guide to Substantive and Theoretical Contributions*. Baywood, New York.

South, Stanley
1977 *Method and Theory in Historical Archaeology*. Academic Press, New York

Friends of Mammoth v. Board of Supervisors of Mono County (1972) 8 Cal.3d 247; 104 Cal.Rptr. 761; 502 P.2d 1049.

Society for California Archaeology v. County of Butte (1977) 65 Cal. App.3d 832.