

What is Historical Archaeology?

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Mount Locust is a historical house, a museum home, located on the Natchez Trace Parkway about 25 miles outside Natchez, Mississippi. It was first established in the late 1700s as an inn on the old Trace, but when steamboat traffic transformed transportation, Mount Locust became a successful cotton plantation. By then, Natchez was a thriving commercial center on the Mississippi River. The Natchez District where Mount Locust is located was famous in the antebellum period for its cotton, slaves, and grand mansions where the wealthy planters lived. Beginning in the 1940s, when Mount Locust was acquired by the National Parks for the purpose of operating as a historic home museum, archaeological work was conducted on the property. This early archaeological work concentrated around the existing main house and aided in its restoration to a circa 1800 appearance. More recent archaeological investigations are concentrated on the inhabitants of Mount Locust who did not live in the big house; the African-American slaves who in 1860 numbered close to 70. There are virtually no traces of the enslaved African Americans visible on today's landscape. So today, Mount Locust is not just a museum home, it is also an archaeological site.

Many archaeologists across the country have been conducting excavations of sites like Mount Locust where our recent cultural forebears lived. Some of the historic sites that archaeologists investigate are associated with famous people or well-known events in American history. Places like these which have received the attention of archaeologists include George Washington's Mount Vernon home (Pogue 1994), Colonial Williamsburg (Brown and Samford 1994), the site of the battle of Little Bighorn (Scott et al. 1989), Thomas Jefferson's Monticello (Kelso 1986), and very recently, the original site of Jamestown Fort (Kelso 1998). Before modern landfills, our ancestors disposed of trash close to the places where they lived and worked. While some of the debris of everyday life has decayed away, some lies buried beneath our feet. Archaeologists can learn a great deal about day-to-day life when we recover and study this trash. For example, animal bones tell us about diet; positions of bullets and buttons from military uniforms tell us about the course of battles; broken dishes and bottles tell us about material culture and living conditions; house foundations, nails, window glass, personal items like coins, and parts of eyeglasses and pocket watches tell us about technology and economic status. Much of the material we recover in excavations can be assigned very accurate dates of manufacture, so there are many reliable ways of determining age. This kind of archaeology is called historical archaeology. Historical archaeologists, because of the time periods we study - that associated with writing, often use documents in their research. Professional historical archaeologists spend many years learning and acquiring the archaeological and historical skills necessary to identify and interpret the trash from the recent past. In some cases, data from historical archaeology are challenging some of the interpretations of history that we often find in history books!

A great example of rewriting history can be found at the battlefield site of Little Bighorn (Scott et al. 1989; Fox and Wood 1997). The battle, often referred to as Custer's Last Stand, has been an enduring American legend since it occurred in 1876. Interestingly, the interpreted events were based primarily on available documentary resources - the remembrances of Custer's men who fought in the battle, remembrances of those who buried the 210 men who died, and a few Indians participated in the battle. Not surprisingly, the accounts of the whites and those of the Indians were often at odds, and it was the accounts of the whites that were accepted as most accurate. Systematic archaeological investigations have allowed experts to paint a more reliable picture of the course of the battle and understand that what has been depicted as a courageous last stand was more of a rout and more closely matched the accounts of the Indians (Fox and Wood 1997). This "new" interpretation was based largely on mapping the precise locations of different types of bullets, and military uniform buttons.

Historical archaeology is also allowing us to rewrite the history of another group, African Americans, especially enslaved African Americans. Most of the surviving historical documents that describe what life was like for slaves were written by slave owners and others with their own agendas to advance. These documents give us a view that may not have been the same as the story that might have been told by enslaved peoples themselves. Archaeology in and around places where slave houses once stood not only lets us reconstruct what their houses were like, but gives us clues about their diet (surviving in the form of animal bones and plant remains), and other aspects of daily life. Interestingly, while history teaches us that slaves were not allowed to learn to read and write, the archaeological record at many sites across the South is hinting that writing was perhaps more common than we thought! Why else would we consistently get parts of reading glasses, slate pencils and other artifacts used for reading and writing? Writing in particular would have been a handy skill to have (and conceal!) if you needed a pass to visit your kin on a neighboring plantation.

Research questions are essential components of all archaeological investigations, including historical archaeology. Historical archaeologists, like prehistoric archaeologists, don't just go dig stuff up because we know it is there. All archaeologists know where lots of sites are located. Rather, historical archaeologists develop research questions for a number of reasons. First, because archaeological sites are considered non-renewable cultural resources, the only reason to "sacrifice" a site to the shovels and trowels of the archaeologist is to answer important questions. In fact, most archaeologists do not dig the entire site (at least under ideal conditions) but leave a portion undisturbed for future archaeologists who will have even better methods for extracting information from the debris of the past. As professional archaeologists dig, we destroy sites, but try to balance the destruction by recording as much information as possible. Imagine how much more destructive is non-professional digging by bottle collectors and pot hunters! Secondly, and most importantly from a scientific perspective, without research questions, an archaeologist can find herself drowning in data and unable to interpret what the data might mean. The archaeologist must know which bits of information to record and consider and which are unimportant. The data which pertain to the questions are important. For example, a person could analyze a common wooden pencil. The analyst

could actually record a nearly infinite number of measurements on the pencil, like the diameter in a million different places. Would all that data inform anyone? The question tells the analyst which information is important. If you wanted to know what was the most common pencil color preferred by college sophomores, measuring the diameter of pencils is useless. The questions we have about the past and the archaeological record are vital to making reliable inferences about the past. The kinds of questions generally asked by historical archaeologists are often the same as for prehistoric archaeology including questions about housing, subsistence, politics, religion, and general material conditions.

Sometimes professional archaeologists get bogged down in special lingo and fail to effectively share knowledge with students and non-professionals. This makes what we do appear to be somewhat mystical. Archaeologists are not like Indiana Jones. We seek no golden idols, we hunt for no treasure other than the understanding of the past and the relationship between the past and the present. Most archaeologists agree that in order to understand the present, we must have some understanding of the past, the history. In the case of African-American slavery, the more complete history is acquired through the archaeological record, because most of the historical data that we have was actually written by slave owners and other white folks. They, of course, had particular viewpoints that the African Americans themselves may not have shared. The same is true for many other peoples of the past who themselves left no written documents. Luckily, they left artifacts and other evidence in archaeological context that allows us, today, to have a deeper appreciation of the lives of not only the rich and famous, but also the everyday people just like us.

Historical archaeology is the study of past human cultures by the material they left behind in the archaeological record, but also includes the study of the documents they left behind. But historical archaeology is not history. Because of the focus on culture, we include historical archaeology within the field of anthropology. To study historical archaeology in colleges and universities across the nation, you would go to the anthropology department. So, the mundane, everyday objects we encounter, broken bottles and dishes, rusty old nails and other bits of metal, brick rubble, animal bones, lost buttons, and other debris of everyday life, tell us some about history, but even more about the culture of those who left that evidence behind.

Interesting Websites!

Little Bighorn Battlefield Site
<http://www.custerbattle.com/index.htm>

Andrew Jackson's Hermitage
<http://www.thehermitage.com>

Born in Slavery (Library of Congress)
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>

Jamestown Rediscovery
<http://www.apva.org>

African-American Archaeology in Mississippi
<http://ocean.otr.usm.edu/~aloung/afam.html>

Jefferson's Monticello
<http://www.monticello.org/>

Suggested Readings:

Brown, Marley R., III and Patricia Samford

- 1994 Current Archaeological Perspectives on the Growth and Development of Williamsburg. In *Historical Archaeology of the Chesapeake*, edited by Paul Shackel and Barbara J. Little, pp. 231-245. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC.

Deetz, James

- 1988 American Historical Archaeology: Methods and Results. *Science* 239:362-367.

Ferguson, Leland

- 1992 *Uncommon Ground Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800*. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington.

Fox, Richard A. Jr. and W. Raymond Wood.

- 1997 *Archaeology, History, and Custer's Last Battle: The Little Big Horn Revisited*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Kelso, William

- 1984 *Kingsmill Plantations, 1619-1800: Archaeology of Country Life in Colonial Virginia*. Academic Press, Orlando.
- 1986 The Archaeology of Slave Life at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello: "A Wolf by the Ears". *Journal of New World Archaeology* 5(4): 5-20.
- 1998 Jamestown Rediscovered! Paper presented at the Society for Historical Archaeology Conference on Historical and Underwater Archaeology, January 6-10, 1998, Atlanta, GA

Pogue, Dennis J.

- 1994 Mount Vernon: Transformation of an Eighteenth-Century Plantation System. In *Historical Archaeology of the Chesapeake*, edited by Paul A. Shackel and Barbara J. Little, pp. 101-114. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington.

Scott, Douglas D, Richard A. Fox Jr., Melissa A. Connor, and Dick Hannon

- 1989 *Archaeological Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.