

Is It Worth Saving?: The Condition of Archaeological Documentary Record and Strategies for Preservation

by

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“[Historical] objects are events which have finished happening, and conditions [are] no longer in existence. Only when they are no longer perceptible do they become objects of historical thought” (Collingwood 1946:233).

Introduction

Scholars engaged in research in the history of anthropology and archaeology have long been aware of the deplorable conditions in which records as to anthropology’s development in time are found and stored. All too often the researcher finds records in individual and institutional hands that are physically degrading because of the lack of proper storage facilities, the fiscal inability to hire professional archivists, the usage of improper methods of acquisition and curation, and dwindling financial resources to properly care for materials. It is now the time to ask if anthropological records are worth saving, and if they are, what are the best strategies to be employed to ensure their survival and protection now and into the future.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that the records of the subdiscipline of archaeology are worth saving and that there is a great sense of urgency to get about the business of identification and preservation before archaeological documentary records are further destroyed due to neglect and the lack of means to ensure their future existence¹. This paper will define the problems of identification and preservation of archaeological records as they exist now and suggest strategies to rectify those problems.

The Problem: The Current Physical and Storage Conditions of Documentary Materials Related to the Development of Americanist Archaeology

“Archaeology’s past, among other things, is made up of individual and institutions. They relate to each other through methodological, theoretical, and socio-political undercurrents. Out of the relationship between the archaeologist and the institution came the successes and failures that led archaeology to develop and mature through time” (Givens 1992:51). In recent years Americanist archaeology has seen an increased interest in its origins and in what those origins may have to say about the future course of archaeological endeavors. Such interest is evidenced by the appearance of four primary works in the history of archaeology: Bruce Trigger’s *A History of Archaeological Thought*, *American Archaeology Past and Future* edited by David J. Meltzer, Don D. Fowler, and Jeremy A. Sabloff, *Tracing Archaeology’s Past* edited by Andrew L. Christenson, and “The History of American Archaeology: An Examination and Procedure” by Robert L. Schuyler. However, the resurgence of interest in the history of Americanist archaeology carries with it little professional interest in ensuring that documentary materials about archaeology’s past are identified and preserved. In fact a survey of the literature suggests that only two published works exist regarding the identification and preservation of documentary materials in Americanist archaeology². Avocational and professional archaeologists as well as institutions serving as repositories for archaeological documentary materials **must be made aware that their records describe part of culture history of what is now the United States** and those records must be preserved. In addition, archaeological records have now taken on a newer functional importance for the archaeological community other than as evidence of its intellectual development. Repatriation of artifacts and burial remains are inextricably linked to documentary records created by the archaeologist. The preservation of such records is essential if the repatriation process is to continue into the future. These resources are irreplaceable and must be identified before they are irretrievably lost. Since the problem involves an enormity of scope and effort, any program of records identification and preservation will be on-going and intensive over the duration of many years.

¹ This paper is a revised form of a paper originally presented during the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research Symposium “Is it Worth Saving: Issues and Strategies for the Preservation of the Anthropological Record,” Rancho Santa Fe, California.

² The first work to appear on this subject was in 1985 with the appearance of *Preserving Field Records: Archival Techniques for Archaeologists and Anthropologists*, edited by Mary Anne Kentworthy, Eleanor M. King, Mary Elisabeth Ruwell, and Trudy Van Houten. In 1990 the second book on the identification and preservation of archaeological documentary materials appeared under the pens of Michael Trimble and Tom Meyers. Their *Saving the Past from the Future: Archaeological Curation in the Saint Louis District* is based on practical identification and curation problems encountered within the United States Corps of Engineers, Saint Louis District offices.

From the standpoint of Americanist archaeology the problem of the existence of documentary materials relating to its development can be seen in the physical conditions of personal papers of archaeologists, their diaries (if any), unpublished correspondence, site reports, field notes, and the condition of the so-called "Grey Literature". In addition, the existence and condition of photographic and electronic media records (i.e. video tape, sound tape, and computer data storage disks and tapes) must also be taken into account. Besides the records of archaeologists in both public and private hands, other categories of records must also be identified and their preservation ensured. These records include: (1) documents pertaining to the planning, research analysis, and publication of field projects; (2) administrative and curatorial records held by museums, libraries, universities, and other institutions; (3) records of regional and national societies concerned with archaeological research; and (4) oral histories which are generally relevant to the history of archaeology (Committee on the History of Archaeology Statement 1990:4). These materials are the stuff of the history of archaeology and its development in time. It is also evidence of part of the cultural history of the United States that must be preserved.

There has been almost no research conducted on the state, preservation, and need for the conservation of records which are the evidence of the development of archaeology in the United States. The research that has been done was carried out informally by interested historians of archaeological science. The observations by these researchers and others made by the Society for American Archaeology now indicate the almost universal deplorable conditions under which many personal and institutional archival collections are maintained. One of the institutional archival collections contacted by this writer while on a research trip had their records stored underneath a number of desks in an office housing a secretarial pool. One of the secretaries who worked in that pool had also been placed in charge of the collections. When asked about access to certain portions of the collections the secretary could not answer the question but instead asked for help in organizing the collections, as she had no idea about their content and importance other than it had to do with "some archaeologist who had worked in Mayan archaeology". That "some archaeologist" was Sylvanus Morley, a pioneer in the study of Mayan hieroglyphs. This occurrence and others show that many archival collections in institutional and in private possession are not properly conserved and archived. Because of financial constraints and personnel who are not trained in curation methodologies and in the maintenance of collections, many historical sources of importance describing the development of archaeology in the United States are being thrown out, destroyed, or left in improper states of preservation. However, it should be mentioned that some institutions are now recognizing the importance of their archaeological documentary collections and are now taking steps to upgrade their physical facilities for storage and are improving their maintenance technologies of the paper and photographic collections that they have.

In many cases, individual archaeologists have never given any thought to the disposition of their papers. The professional and avocational archaeological communities do not have a clear program in place that will serve to guide the disposition of archaeological records upon the retirement or death of an archaeologist. Furthermore, there is no form of assistance to help those families of deceased archaeologists in the disposition of their personal papers. The same thing can be said for collections of living archaeologists and institutions involved with archaeology in identifying, preserving, and conserving the archaeological heritage of the United States. There is no agent within the Society for American Archaeology to facilitate the placement and conservation of materials. With this in mind many researchers have not realized that the survival of many of the records describing the history and heritage of archaeology in the United States are in danger of being permanently lost due to neglect.

There is also a second larger question of identification and preservation to be answered: What of the condition of records that are not part of recognized personal and institutional collections? These records are frequently forgotten by those who hold them. They are records, personal or institutional, that are stored in attics, garages, basements either in private homes or in the nooks and crannies of institutional buildings long since forgotten. These are the records of archaeologists that have either been stored at their residence prior to death or in the private residences of their families. These are also the records of archaeologists that have been given to research institutions and libraries where the material was "stored" but long since forgotten. This writer was called to a private residence in Saint Louis a number of years ago to ascertain the importance of some papers and diaries of a person "who had done archaeological work in Illinois". These materials were found by the homeowner in the attic of his house, the papers being placed there several owners ago. The papers contained many letters by Paul F. Titterton about his work at Cahokia Mounds. The existence of this type of material must be made known and the processes of identification and curation begun. It may not be too extreme to note that the existence of most of the records relating to the development of Americanist archaeology may not currently be known. If this is the case then our sense of urgency must be heightened as such records are immediately being threatened with destruction as they continue to physically degrade or are thrown out when private residences or institutional physical facilities are sold and change ownership.

The Solution: Identification, Preservation, and Curation

It is recognized that the longer the archaeological community waits to create an on-going detailed series of strategies for the identification and preservation of documentary materials the more destruction and loss of such records will occur. If anything the pace of destruction of these records and their loss may accelerate. The Americanist archaeological community certainly has the capacity to solve its records management problems but it must approach it through one voice, with the means to identify, curate, and preserve. A fragmented approach will only lead to a more disparate means of solving the problem and the continual waste of precious financial resources. If such an approach is allowed to continue the loss of documentary materials now and into the future will be assured.

No program of managing documentary materials in archaeology and anthropology can succeed without remembering two points (1) identification and preservation of documentary materials charting the development of anthropological sciences and (2) making known those resources to those interested in the history of anthropology and archaeology or to those engaged in writing upon its development. No program can succeed without preservation of records or the means to use those records. Other than for their intrinsic value, anthropological records are of no value unless they can be used at a later date to enhance the

researches and knowledge of others and to describe what we already knew about human beings. But, without identification and preservation there would be no records to study and the advancement of anthropological sciences would certainly be retarded.

In summary, the subdiscipline of archaeology has voluminous amounts of documentary materials that are in various states of preservation. It also has a great deal of material yet to be identified. Identification, preservation, and conservation of documentary materials related to the origins and growth of archaeology in the United States must occur quickly and efficiently if our science's heritage is to be preserved and knowable. However, a sense of urgency is in the air because of the long neglected state of archaeological records. We must move swiftly, yes, but we must also move with a well-coordinated plan of attack.

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III. Current Research

Professor Bruce G. Trigger, McGill University, has agreed to serve as Contributing Editor for the topic "History of Archaeology" for the new *Journal of Archaeological Research*, which will be edited by Gary M. Feinman and T. Douglas Price and published quarterly by Plenum Publishing Corporation. An article on the history of archaeology will appear every 3 to 5 years and will consist of 10-15 pages of printed text and 5-10 pages of recent bibliography. Trigger's first contribution, which will survey developments in the history of archaeology since 1989, is scheduled to be submitted June 1, 1993.

Neal L. Trubowitz has been engaged in research on the Missouri Historical Society's collections. To that end, he gave a paper at the 49th Southeastern Archaeological Conference Annual Meeting in Little Rock, Arkansas (22 October 1992) titled "Our Ancestors' Archaeology: Documenting the Missouri Historical Society's Pioneer Archaeology Collections. The abstract of his paper reads: "From 1866 until 1921, the Missouri Historical Society was a leading organization amassing archaeological remains from Missouri and parts of Illinois and Arkansas. Thereafter, the collections languished until the University of Missouri at Columbia borrowed them from 1962-1979; some cataloging and research was accomplished. Since 1990 the Society has reinvested in its archaeological past. I report on the unpacking of over 9,000 objects including 600 ceramic vessels, and research on