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Book Review of "The Archaeology of North American Farmsteads" by Mark Groover

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF NORTH AMERICAN FARMSTEADS, by Mark Groover, 2008, The American Experience in Archaeological Perspective Series, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 176 pages, ill., maps, \$24.95 (paper).

Reviewed by LouAnn Wurst and Dustin Conklin

Groover's *Archaeology of North American Farmsteads* is a brief, clearly written and manageable introduction to a resource type that historical archaeologists have been studying for decades. This book is part of a new series, *The American Experience in Archaeological Perspective*, which aims to highlight research on a particular area of archaeology in the United States and make this research available to a wider audience. In keeping with this goal, the book begins with several introductory chapters, titled *Why Study Farm Sites?* and *The Archaeology of Farmsteads and Rural Life*. These are followed by three chapters surveying case studies divided into time periods: colonial, federal and antebellum, and post-bellum and 20th century. In each, examples are selected to represent the different regions of the northeast, southeast and midwest. Groover's aim is to provide an introduction to farmsteads for historical archaeology students and to "offer potentially useful ideas" to archaeologists who regularly deal with farmsteads (p. 7). His larger goal is to begin the process of defining a broader research strategy geared towards reconstructing regionally based models of agricultural production and material life, arguing that archaeologists should "systematically define the main economic and material characteristics of farms in different regions through time using fine-grained contextual frameworks" (p. 7). We believe the Groover has been very successful at achieving his aim, while his goals, as stated, have several problematic aspects.

The book provides a good introduction to the topic of farmstead studies and the organization makes it very easy to follow. To the student being introduced to the study of farmsteads or the professional who is unfamiliar with this kind of resource, Groover offers a quick overview of the major issues involved

and provides a strong foundation on which they could build. He points the readers in the direction of other source material to aid in their own study of farmsteads. In general though, the book is under referenced with a particular lack of the myriad sources from historians relating to farms and agriculture.

Groover uses a handful of studies from different time periods and regions to perform much of the "heavy lifting" in this book. Dividing the case studies by era and then having representative studies from major regions seems logical and helps the reader access the material. However, it is not readily apparent why this structure is preferable. Groover's point is to document how the North American farmstead has changed over the centuries. He himself argues that "farmstead archaeology should attempt to construct regionally based models that examine the interrelated topics of agricultural production types and material life within specific physiographic zones" (p. 128). Given this, it may have been more beneficial to organize the sections around regions to show the transformation of farms within each region over time, rather than using time as the main classification scheme. As it stands, the regional case studies are separated into different chapters, making this transformation hard to see in any but the grossest way.

The classification of farmsteads by region appears problematic on its own and points to a contradiction that lays at the foundation of this book. Groover argues that there is a great deal of diversity in farms: diversity in farm types, ethnicity, race, nationality, religious orientation, and household structure. He then "smoothes" this diversity by lumping farms together based on a rough spatial proximity and the nature of the farm or farming practices are either omitted or downplayed in the discussion. Thus, the emphasis on regional models, reinforced by the structure of the book, inadvertently downplays the recognition of the variability in farms that archaeologists have ignored for so long— the "just another farm" syndrome. The issue is not simply region as such, although that is clearly important, but the nature of a farm's production and changes in farm practices within farm type.

This problem stems from Groover's approach to the examples he uses. Groover

provides a nice overview and summary of the research conducted for each case study but sticks pretty close to their original research designs. This strategy makes it difficult to then use the case studies to build into something larger and more synthetic. While the case studies are interesting, the reader has to look through the cracks to glimpse the larger issues involved in the transformation of agriculture. The book could have used more examples to help drive the point home, but we suspect the organization itself played a large role in stymieing Groover's own goal of developing regionally-based models. This is exacerbated by Groover's approach, which provides many particular details about the examples used, but is limited to the context presented in the original research. We would have liked to see more discussion of larger issues of production, economic markets, and context that would pull all the case studies together. Without more central organization, the case studies remain separate, combined here for the readers' convenience, but adding little more to Groover's goal of larger models.

One of the most serious issues in the book is that most of Groover's examples focus solely on the domestic context of each farm. We both came to wonder whether this is really a book about farmsteads or a book about people who just happen to live on a farm. We believe that this is one of the most serious problems with much historical farmstead archaeology, and one that is unwittingly reproduced in this volume. In fact, throughout the case studies, we learn a great deal about these farm families' consumer behavior and whether they were emulating their urban brethren and only a scant amount about the actual business of farming and agricultural production and how this business was transformed over the centuries. Since most of the analysis revolves around the domestic areas of the farm, we learn little about the actual farming or production that went on at these farmsteads, and Groover provides very little reference to land use on the farm. Land use was a major component of the farm economy and productivity was only touched upon in some cases by an examination of the organization of outbuildings on the farms. Thus, most of the analyses discussed dealt with issues that are not specific to farms; rather they represent larger issues, such as

consumption and health, which just happened to occur on these farms.

Groover makes a strong argument for the importance of studying farmsteads. The point is made clear in the first section when he discusses the lack of work done pertaining to farmsteads and the astonishing rate at which this archaeological resource is disappearing. This notion is reinforced through a discussion of the high frequency in which farmsteads are encountered in a CRM context and, subsequently, are dismissed as a “redundant and expendable archaeological resource” (p. 6). However, since the vast majority of the remainder of the book deals with issues not specific to farms, Groover essentially, if implicitly, negates his own argument. By focusing on issues that are just as applicable to an urban context while ignoring or leaving undeveloped issues that are specific to farmsteads or agricultural production, Groover seems to have fallen into the same trap that he hopes to remedy.

Even given these critiques, we believe that this book represents a valuable contribution to the study of farms. We spent many hours talking about these issues and can see how this book could provide an important source of discussion in advanced undergraduate archaeology courses. Perhaps in this way, Groover’s book will ultimately be the fulcrum that moves us toward the kinds of synthetic understandings of agriculture that our discipline so sorely needs.

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