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Has Historical Archaeology Survived the Bicentennial?: An Inquiry into the Development of Historical Archaeology in the United States

by Bert Salwen

Over the past fifteen years, historical archaeology, as both an area of research and a source of professional employment, has grown enormously. These have also been the years of our national preoccupation with celebration of the American Revolution Bicentennial.

Now that Margaret Thatcher has officially ended the commemorative period by bringing us the Treaty of Paris--the document that officially ended the war--it seems appropriate and useful to begin to explore the relationships between these two sets of phenomena. I will try to do just that.

In the past, when trying to explain the rapid growth of historical archaeology, I have tended to consider three factors.

1. The Bicentennial: It has been assumed that interest on the part of all Americans, including American archaeologists, in the events surrounding the separation from England and the formation of the United States created an atmosphere conducive to the exploration of the material remains of the Revolutionary period, and that this interest generated support, both intellectual and monetary, for archaeological activities relating to that historic period, thus encouraging a shift of professional interest to this area of research.

2. The shift in general anthropological interest toward study of our own complex society: Over the past thirty years, American social/cultural anthropologists have increasingly focused research attention on aspects of their own society and culture. Community studies, urban studies, interest in American "subcultures" and "ethnic groups," have become more frequent and more academically respectable. I have felt that American anthropological archaeologists have participated in this trend, expanding their definition of archaeology to encompass the material remains of their own complex literate society.

3. The growth of the "historic preservation" programs of both National and State governments: Congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) in 1966 and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in 1969. Both statutes required that Federal agencies consider the effects of their actions on "historic properties," and the former law also created a network of relationships between Federal and State governments which encouraged and supported State-level efforts to protect the Nation's

cultural heritage. Neither of these laws, nor the regulations promulgated under them, distinguishes between prehistoric and historical manifestations. When working within the Federal-State historic preservation framework, archaeologists are required to give equally careful attention to all "eligible" materials, and this legal requirement has undoubtedly encouraged many prehistorians to become at least minimally competent in the study of materials relating to the historic period.

I have tried to assess the role of the Bicentennial celebration in relation to the two other discrete, but undoubtedly inter-related, factors by examining some events and activities in the development of historical archaeology over the past fifteen years. In doing so, I have made some simplifying assumptions, which may or may not be completely valid, but which seem to me to be acceptable at this level of investigation. First, I have assumed that the boundaries of the field of historical archaeology in the United States are coterminous with those of its major professional organization--the Society for Historical Archaeology. Furthermore, I have assumed that the contents of the Newsletter of the SHA adequately reflect the interests and activities of the major segment of the profession. Hence, from this point on, most of my comments will be based on analysis of a 15-year run of the Newsletter, chronicling the activities of historical archaeologists in the United States from the founding of the SHA in 1968 until the end of 1982.

If the approach of the Bicentennial year did indeed provide a major, sustained, stimulus to the practice of historical archaeology, this relationship should be observable as a marked increase, in the years immediately preceding the celebration, in the number of field projects devoted to the investigation of archaeological manifestations dating from the Revolutionary War period. Furthermore, if this stimulus was a basic factor in the long-term growth of the discipline, the figures should indicate continuing high levels of activity in this area of research in the years following the Bicentennial. I have tried to test this hypothesis by tabulating frequencies of such activities as reported in the "Current Research" pages of the SHA Newsletter.

(A note on method: In determining frequencies, I have included all field projects which appear to deal, in whole or in part, with assemblages dating from between about 1770 and 1785, whether or not they are directly connected with "revolutionary" actors or events. It was not always possible, from the short Newsletter treatments, to be absolutely certain about precise deposition dates. When in doubt, I tried to err in the direction of inclusiveness. Also, some reports are not specific about fieldwork dates. To achieve maximum consistency, I have

tabulated frequencies according to "year reported.")

Frequencies of field projects related to the Revolutionary War period reported in the years between 1968 and 1982 are presented in Figure 1. Examination of both absolute frequencies and frequency change through time suggests to me that archaeological interest in this period may have been dictated more by expediency than by any long-term intellectual interest in the events or processes of the Revolution. In no year between 1968 and 1982 were more than 29 instances of relevant field work reported. Activity appears to have peaked in the years immediately preceding the celebration (29 instances in 1974 and 28 in 1975) when Bicentennial commission grants and contracts for archaeological work in connection with restoration of colonial buildings provided opportunities for funded research, but it dropped off sharply during and after the big year.

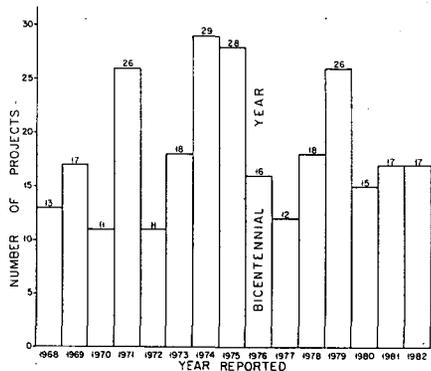


Figure 1. Field projects related (in whole or in part) to the Revolutionary War period, as reported in the Newsletter of the Society for Historical Archaeology.

Because, as we all know, analysis and report-writing should always follow quickly after fieldwork, the contribution of Revolutionary War period research to the development of historical archaeology in the United States should also be reflected in the production of reports dealing with this subject area. Turning again to the Newsletter, I have assembled information about papers on Revolutionary War period topics presented at annual meetings of the Society for Historical Archaeology (Table 1). If my assignment of subject matter is correct, none of the first fifteen programs at SHA annual meetings, through January 1982, included more than eleven papers on Revolutionary period topics. While there appears to be a slight increase in absolute numbers of pertinent papers per meeting over time, this probably reflects only the overall increase in size of the annual meeting.

A special session devoted to the Revolutionary War, "Military Sites 1774-84," was held at the 1976 meeting, appropriately convened at Philadelphia. Another, on

Table 1

PAPERS ON TOPICS RELATING TO THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR PRESENTED AT ANNUAL MEETINGS OF THE SOCIETY FOR HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Year	Number of Papers	Year	Number of Papers	Year	Number of Papers
1968	-	1973	1	1978	8
1969	2	1974	0	1979	10
1970	3	1975	1	1980	9
1971	5	1976	9	1981	7
1972	2	1977	2	1982	11

"Archaeological Preservation at Fort Michilimackinac," at the 1978 annual meeting, may also qualify. There have been no others.

The Revolutionary War period does not appear to have been any more popular at meetings of the Conference on Historic Sites Archaeology than it was at SHA meetings. The Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology seems to be somewhat ambivalent--alternating complete disregard with sessions devoted entirely, or almost entirely, to the Revolutionary period.

Obviously, much more research, including a full bibliographic study, must be completed before it will be possible to assess adequately the role of Revolutionary War period research in the birth and growth of American historical archaeology, but these preliminary findings suggest that it has not been as important as some have believed. The nationwide fascination with early American history generated by the Bicentennial and the timely infusion of Bicentennial-related research funds certainly contributed to the successful parturition of this relatively new field of specialization, but the effect of the Bicentennial appears to have been relatively short-lived. It cannot really account for the continued vitality of the discipline in the years after 1976.

Table 2

SOCIETY FOR HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY: INDIVIDUAL MEMBERSHIPS

Year	Month	Individual Memberships	Year	Month	Individual Memberships
1968	Apr.	317	1977	Jan.	1174
1971	Apr.	390	1977	Nov.	1212
1972	Jan.	357	1978	Jan.	1237
1974	Jan.	697	1979	Nov.	1434
1974	Nov.	724	1980	Sep.	1457
1975	May	804	1983	Feb.	1482
1976	Jan.	928			

This continued vitality is probably most concretely expressed in the growth of membership of the Society for Historical Archaeology (Table 2, Figure 2). In examining Table 2 and Figure 2, two things are particularly worthy of attention. First, the membership figures do not appear to reflect any "Bicentennial effect." A period of steady growth begins four years before the Bicentennial year. This might be correlated

with the increase in Revolutionary period archaeological activity illustrated in Figure 1. But growth continues at essentially the same rate in the four years after the Bicentennial, for which Figure 1 documents a decrease in this kind of archaeology. I don't want to push this point too vigorously--I can think of a number of explanations involving indirect effects of the Bicentennial--but I did want to call it to your attention.

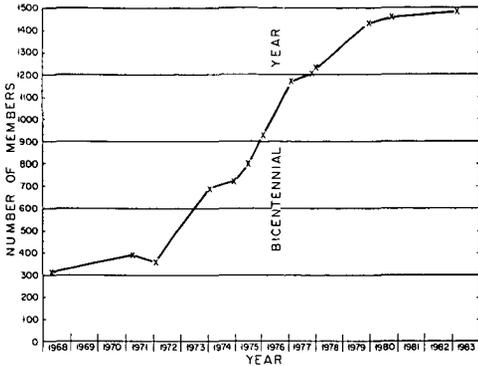


Figure 2. Individual memberships in the Society for Historical Archaeology.

Secondly, the membership curve shows a sharp change in slope after January 1972. When it was incorporated in April 1968, the SHA had 317 members. In January 1972, the membership was still only 357 (an increase of 12.6% in some three and one half years). But by January 1974, the figure was 697, an increase of 95.2% in two years, and membership continued to increase at an only slightly slower rate into the 1980s. I suggest that this very marked change in rate of growth, which began sometime in 1972 or 1973, is directly related to a specific identifiable set of changes in the Federal-State historic preservation process.

As noted at the beginning of this discussion, the National Historic Preservation Act had been passed in 1966. However, as originally enacted, Section 106 of the statute appeared to limit the responsibility of Federal agencies to "properties included in the National Register of Historic Places." Unfortunately, in 1966, relatively few archaeological properties had been identified, evaluated, and entered into the National Register. In consequence, during its first few years, the NHPA had relatively little effect on the practice of archaeology.

The National Environmental Policy Act, which went into effect on January 1, 1970, required Federal agencies to consider "the environmental impact of the proposed action," including impacts on the historic and cultural aspects of the environment. This statute, as implemented, involved the preparation of environmental impact statements, and, in the years immediately after its passage,

archaeologists were sometimes called upon by builders and government agencies to provide expert information about archaeological resources.

The major change, however, occurred on May 17, 1971, when the President signed Executive Order 11593, which instructed all Federal agencies regarding their historic preservation responsibilities under both the NHPA and NEPA. Most important for my argument, the executive order made it quite clear that Federal agencies must consider the effects of their actions on resources "eligible" for inclusion in the National Register, as well as on those already included in the Register. Thus, E.O. 11593 generated nationwide efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect archaeological sites in areas threatened by a great number and variety of Federal "undertakings," and these efforts, of course, enormously expanded the role of the archaeological community.

Furthermore, as noted earlier, neither the laws, the executive order, nor the regulations that implemented them made any distinction between resources of the prehistoric and historic periods. Both might be equally important. Hence, archaeologists employed by Federal or State agencies, or doing contract work under Federal guidelines, often found it useful to become familiar with materials and methods relating to the archaeology of both prehistoric and historic societies. The fact that the sharp increase in SHA membership began very shortly after the promulgation of E.O. 11593 suggests that some of the new members were practicing prehistorians or graduate students who were led initially to historical archaeology by the requirements of the historic preservation process.

This conjecture receives some support from the answers to a questionnaire distributed to SHA members in late 1980. Over six hundred members provided information about "primary employment" as follows: Government agency - 27%, Contracts - 23%, University - 19%, Private industry - 8%, Student - 11%, Other - 11%. In other words, in 1980, half of the historical archaeologists who were members of the major professional organization in their field did work within a Federally-mandated historic preservation framework--either in the United States or in Canada!

In this context, the slight decrease in rate of membership growth after November 1980 may be attributable, at least in part, to the cutbacks in historic preservation enforcement and funding instituted at the start of the Reagan administration-- and this suggests that the health of historical archaeological research in the United States may be particularly sensitive to changes in government policy.

Recognition of this potentially unstable situation leads me back to the last of the

factors which I believe were influential in the development of historical archaeology in the United States.

It should be apparent that the first two factors involved external stimuli--generated by forces outside of the archaeological community, and not really subject to our control. The Bicentennial celebration provided a favorable climate and practical opportunities for certain kinds of archaeological research. To some extent at least, we took advantage of the opportunities, and, in doing so, made some important contributions to public interpretation of colonial life and the Revolutionary struggle. When the Bicentennial year had passed, most of us seem to have gone on to other things. The establishment of a strong national historic preservation program created different opportunities and challenges, and brought many new converts to work in the fields of historical archaeology. In this case also, we have contributed to broader national goals by providing the specialized information needed for protection of physical aspects of our historic heritage. At this point in time, we do not know if a weakened historic preservation program will negatively affect our research efforts. In any case, we cannot do very much, as archaeologists, to change the political situation.

In contrast, the third factor--the expansion of anthropological theory and techniques to encompass study of complex literate society--is an internal stimulus, based on our own expanding intellectual concerns, specifically, our interest in applying the tools of science, social science, and history to a wide range of patterns discoverable in the material products of our own society. I have not attempted to quantify the contribution of this factor to the development of North American historical archaeology, but I suspect that it has been quite important. The diversity of interests expressed in choices of field projects, meeting topics, and subjects for publication would certainly suggest that, in spite of temptations from the outside, many historical archaeologists prefer to pursue their own research goals. In the long run, this anthropologically-oriented core (no matter where employed), working in increasingly close collaboration with other social scientists and humanists, will probably be the key to the continuing viability of historical archaeology.

Viewed in this context, the activities surrounding the Bicentennial may have been only an attractive and interesting, but transitory, temptation.

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