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MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS IN HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

by

Gilbert Hagerty

The thrill of discovery can come to any of us who is prepared to dig into the forgotten nooks and corners of America, but transcending the thrill of discovery must come increased concern for the significance of contemporary every-day materials on historic sites and of their vital role in bringing new life to American history.

This search for identity within the last thirty years has brought private and public treasure to the hands of the archaeologist to peel back layer by layer of debris of the past, and from it reveal through the artifacts found the constant progression of changes that have taken place since our beginnings, together with the cultural forces that produced them.

The basic aim of the archaeologist is to record and report exactly, and in detail, what he sees— the stratigraphy of the soil, context of artifacts, associations, homogeneity of provenience, and any feature that would aid the interpretation of the site. He is making withdrawals from the bank of history, and unless these withdrawals are re-invested in terms of adding to the common body of truth, they might better be left undisturbed unless it is a salvage operation in which all would be destroyed anyway.

Exhaustive study of historic sites is comparatively new. Exploration of pre-historic sites has been in progress for years. Public interest has increased tremendously since 1906 when the Antiquities Act was passed "to declare by public proclamation historic landmarks, historic and pre-historic structures and other objects of historic and scientific interest, located on the lands owned or controlled by the U.S. Government." Since then a host of other agencies, private as well as government, have arisen to protect and to study significant historic sites in America, many of them through archaeology. One has only to look at the work at Colonial Williamsburg to see the result of careful archaeological work culminating in the restoration of Colonial buildings or to the information provided by archaeology to recreate Plimoth Plantation which is now being revised to conform with newly found evidence. Even now work is in progress in Rome, New York, to rebuild Fort Stanwix and to make it authentic from the archaeological data still under the streets of the business section of that city.

Today's archaeologists are in a better position to use the knowledge of the various related disciplines. Through recent years a kind of synthesis of archaeological, historical, and scientific information has been developed, which in earlier years was not available. Years could be spent in determining the identity of ceramics found on a given site and whether or not they had a homogeneous context with the

site in question. A site is seldom isolated after its initial occupation. Through later years, confusing intrusions of later artifacts appear. A synthesis of most known ceramic data now exists, and a given ceramic shard can usually be identified on the basis of accumulated information from other digs. Major historical museums and restorations have published such material from the body of their experience in this field or have it in their files. A host of books is now available to other interested readers as the result of interest in historic sites archaeology, and as reports on digs appear, more local information is being added. Data on glassware has also been similarly organized for the use of the archaeologist.

The clay pipe has been a subject of discussion on many a dig as this is a common artifact found throughout the land. Since Harrington, Binford, Omwake, Walker, and Hanson have gathered and organized data on pipes, it is now generally possible to identify the period and place of origin of pipes that appear in context. Out of this has come the hypothesis that the stem bore of the clay pipe grows progressively smaller from the time of its introduction in America until some time in the later part of the 18th century. Stem bores range from as large as 10/64ths down to 4/64ths. By statistical analysis, dates may be placed on bores through this range of time with varying degrees of success. Work is still being done to improve the validity of this method. The heraldry of the pipe trade is now better known, and it is possible to distinguish between a Dutch and an English pipe by its general characteristics as well as by specific markings, many of which have now been catalogued.

Trade beads appear in many of the Colonial sites where contact with the Indians was made by trade. The confusion of bead types and the periods into which they fall has emerged into clearer categories of time spans through the studies of Pratt and Kidd, whose publications have helped to unravel many archaeological problems involving trade goods. The beads traded for Manhattan were not the same types traded for fur at Oswego in the mid-18th century. There were some six hundred different kinds of beads in distribution through the intervening time.

Hume, Cotter, and others have assembled categories of artifacts commonly found on Colonial sites and have published well illustrated books on the subject. Reports of specific sites explored are appearing constantly from every quarter, well illustrated and detailed in information. Perhaps an outstanding report of this kind is in the recent publication by our own colleague, Jacob Grimm. He has given exhaustive detail of the finds made at Fort Ligonier and has lavishly illustrated these finds. This report offers an excellent basis for understanding the range of artifacts from a 1758 British fortification of the French and Indian War Period.

While the archaeologist must consult documents, books, references, and special talents, he nevertheless is closer to the past than any. One can read about the harsh winter at Valley Forge, but he will never understand it as well as one who

has excavated the fire hearths of the soldiers' huts and found the little nails from the furniture that was taken from surrounding houses and burned to keep the men warm. Nor will he understand the hunger of the men gathered around those fires until he has brushed the dirt from the scrap bones of animals whose scanty meat fed him— until he learns that these bones were from the least desired parts of the animal and that the more desirable parts fed another's hunger.

The approach to history through archaeology has had a broadening and deepened effect. It has given a better understanding of changes taking place in a society. As a result more attention has been placed on the cultural changes of the past and out of this a more meaningful interest has developed.

An excavated pair of old sheep shears can tell of endless hours of hand manipulation in shearing the scrawny sheep the farmer had to raise to clothe himself and his family. His whole way of life is tied up in this manifestation of a cultural pattern. His economic, social, and political life is there to read if one follows it through. Today sheep still have to be raised and sheared, but it is done much more quickly with electric clippers. Experiments have proved successful in feeding the sheep with a chemical which reacts on the roots of the fiber to enable a man to pull the fleece off by hand without the aid of any tool. In this, too, there are economic, social, and political overtones which reveal the culture of our times.

If we look at an ear of corn, know the process by which it was cultivated, the tools involved in grinding it to meal, and finally come up with corn bread baked in a brick oven in the home, we have an entire way of life tied up in this cycle.

If we take an ear of corn and follow through until it becomes a modern box of packaged breakfast food, we have another entirely different way of life tied to a new technology, and with it comes a host of problems involving its cost to society. What has happened between these two processes is the result of cultural changes involving social, economic, and political forces.

It is to this kind of approach to history that archaeology has contributed so much. The museum with its treasures of artifacts has risen to the challenge of bringing history closer to children. The outdoor museum, especially, has become an extension of the classroom. Teachers, more than ever, are aware that the books cannot tell it all nor as effectively in many cases. The urge is to get closer to the objects that tell the story of our history. What better reason can we find for digging?

Gilbert Hagerty, a member of the Executive Board for The Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology, is recently retired as Director of School Services for Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts. He was formerly Director of the Fort Stanwix Museum, Rome, New York, and is associated with many archaeological and historical organizations. He is author of the book Massacre at Fort Bull.