

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOCIETY FOR HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

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Historical archaeology is the archaeology of the modern world. Most historical archaeologists focus on the period after the 15th century. Historical archaeology is global in scope and deals with all groups of people, not simply those of European descent. Even though many earlier societies had writing: Sumerians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Olmec, and Mayans, specialists in other fields study the archaeological remains of these societies.

The Society for Historical Archaeology is less than fifty years old; however, the roots of historical archaeology stretch back to the seventeenth century. The work of these early researchers might be termed proto-historical archaeology. One very early example is when pilgrims excavated historic period Native American burials mounds on Cape Cod (Cotter 1993: 4). Another early example is the fieldwork of Robert Pagan and Thomas Wright in the 1790s as part of the British Boundary Commission's research establishing the boundary between the United States and the British Maritime Provinces. The Boundary Commission used archaeology to help relocate the site of Samuel de Champlain's 1604 settlement; thereby establishing the border between Canada and the United States (Cotter 1993:5). Later, in 1856 John Hall excavating his ancestor Myles Standish's house at Duxbury, Massachusetts (Deetz 1968:12), and in a few years earlier in 1844 Father Pierre Chazelle conducted initial excavations at Sainte Marie I near Midland, Ontario. These were continued by Father Felix Martin in 1855 and by Kenneth Kidd and colleagues in the mid-20th century (Kidd 1993:49-65).

In the later 19th century North American prehistorians began drifting into historical archaeology through their study of more recent Native American archaeological remains. For instance, in the 1890s Charles Abbot, a self-trained archaeologist best known for his controversial theories regarding an early human presence in the Delaware Valley, excavated a 17th-century Dutch site on Burlington Island New Jersey (Veit and Bello 1999). In the 1930s J. O. Brew, a distinguished Southwestern prehistorian, excavated Awatovi Pueblo in Arizona and its 17th century mission church (Brew 1994). On the East Coast Percival Lombard was excavating early New England house sites in the 1920s as was Henry Hornblower II in the 1940s (Cotter 1993:18).

These early examples aside, in many ways, Jamestown in Virginia was both the cradle and nursery of American historical archaeology. Following a smattering of fieldwork in the 1890s, excavations began in earnest in 1934. However, archaeologists and architects had competing interests and after some conflict, Jean C. [Pinky] Harrington, a founder of the Society for Historical Archaeology, trained in architecture and archaeology, was brought in to end the disagreements and lead the project. Fieldwork continued through 1942. Later Harrington went on to excavate Fort Raleigh National Historic Site and Fort Necessity National Battlefield (Harrington 1994:7-9). John Cotter, and most recently William Kelso have further expanded our understanding of Jamestown through their important excavations.

Almost every part of the United States can claim some early examples of historical archaeology. Charles Fairbanks did pioneering work in Florida and Bunny Fontana in the Southwest . There were important early WPA and CCC excavations at the Morristown National Historical Park in New Jersey (Rutsch and Peters 1977). The 20th century also saw a growing interest in historical archaeology among self-trained practitioners, perhaps the most famous of whom was Roland Wells Robbins (Linebaugh 2004), who did considerable research on early industrial sites especially ironworks. Extensive excavations were carried out in Williamsburg, Virginia, during the restoration of the colonial capital, and later, later in the 1960s Nauvoo, Illinois, was studied by archaeologists working under the sponsorship of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Pykles 2010).

By the mid-20th century, with the development of historic preservation legislation that mandated the archaeological study of resources over fifty years old, a renewed interest in colonial America due to the looming Bicentennial, and a growing scholarly/anthropological interest in the archaeology of the modern world, the stage was set for a professional society dedicated to the study of the modern world.

In 1958 at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, D.C., John Cotter organized a symposium on the Role of Archaeology in Historical Research (Cotter 1993:9.) After further discussion, particularly between Edward B. Jelks, Edward McM. Larrabee, Stanley South, and John Cotter, the idea of a society devoted to historical archaeology was hatched. At the 1966 Central States meeting of the American Anthropological Association in St. Louis, Ed Jelks began planning a gathering of like minded individuals who came together on January 6th and 7th 1967 at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas for what was billed as an “International Conference on Historical Archaeology (Schuyler 2001:1177). The conference was a success and drew 112 conferees. Attendees included Carl Chapman, John Cotter, Charles Fairbanks, “Pinky” Harrington, Ed Jelks, Edward Larrabee, Carlos Margain, Ivor Noël Hume, Arnold Pilling, Carlyle smith, G. Hubert Smith, Stanley South, Wilcomb Washburn, and Arthur Woodward.” (Jelks 1993:10). John Cotter was elected as the first president and the Society was officially incorporated on April 1st, 1968 in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (Jelks 1993:10-11). The first annual meeting of the SHA was held in 1968 in Williamsburg. The society almost immediately began publishing its journal *Historical Archaeology*. The newsletter followed in 1969 (Cleland 1993:14).

During the first several years of the SHA’s history there was trench warfare between those who felt that the field was more historically oriented and those who believed it should be more anthropologically oriented.

The Society’s founding represents a larger wave of interest in historical archaeology during the 1960s. A few years earlier, in 1960, Stanley South had organized the Conference on Historic Site Archaeology (South 19934) and in 1965 the Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology was

organized by Jack Mead and colleagues at the Hotel Thayer in West Point, New York (Smith 1986; Huey 1986; Wilson 1986).

The 1970s saw spectacular growth in the membership of the Society for Historical Archaeology and a growing emphasis on quality research. Theory was largely absent from the journal and conference despite the ongoing efforts of Stanley South and others to make the field more scientific. The late 1970s also saw the arrival of what Kathleen Deagan has jokingly called (1993:20) “Officers for Life”: Teff Rodeffer (Secretary-Treasurer), Ronn Michael Editor), and Norman Barka (Newsletter Editor). These talented and tireless workers helped put the Society on a firm footing. It was also during this period that the Society instituted its first special award series. In 1982 the first J.C. Harrington Medal for outstanding achievement in Historical Archaeology was awarded to Charles Fairbanks (Schuyler 1993:38).

The 1980s saw regular growth in the society’s membership. The journal moved from an annual to a biannual in 1981 and a quarterly in 1990 (Adams 1993). In 1982, reflecting the growing scope of the field, the newsletter added a column on overseas fieldwork (Adams 1993: 26). Briefly, in 1977 the SHA contracted with the AAA to operate the business office. This proved less than satisfactory and in 1984 the board began using a private business office (Adams 1993:27). The Society also came out strongly against treasure hunting during this period and became much more active in the legislative process. Particularly important was the Abandoned Shipwreck Act of 1988 (Costello 1993:33). Special publications also grew as did topical and specialty groups.

Today the Society for Historical Archaeology is the largest organization in the world dedicated to the archaeological study of the modern world and the third largest anthropological organization in the United States. Parallel organizations exist in Great Britain, the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology; Continental Europe; and Australasia, the Australasian Society for Historical Archaeology. It has a longstanding relationship with the Advisory Council on Underwater Archaeology, which shares the society’s annual conference in January.

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