

J. C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology

JAMES DEETZ 1997



In describing his own career, James Deetz picked the year 1948 as a place to begin, observing that it was not only the year he graduated from high school, but also the year he went off to Harvard College from his hometown of Cumberland, Maryland. He was, to use his words, “an early case of affirmative action, providing for the admission of hillbillies to Ivy League institutions.” At Harvard, Jim changed from premed to anthropology in his freshman year, and embarked on a period of undergraduate and graduate training in anthropology at Harvard, interrupted only by four years of service in the United States Air Force during the Korean War.

Before he enlisted in the Air Force, Jim spent a long field season working for Don Lehmer salvaging sites slated to be drowned by the construction of the Oahe Dam on the Missouri River. After returning to Harvard to complete his undergraduate studies—he received his B.A. *cum laude* in 1957, Jim spent more time working on the River Basin Survey, notably at the Medicine Crow site, also in the Missouri River drainage. This project would form the basis of his Ph.D. dissertation, entitled “*An Archaeological Approach to Kinship Change in Eighteenth Century Arikara Culture*,” which he submitted in 1960. That fall he began his university teaching career with an appointment as Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

The same year that Jim did dissertation fieldwork in South Dakota, 1958, he met Harry Hornblower II, the man who would introduce him to the archaeology of “the Pilgrims” and to the world of outdoor living history museums. Harry’s family had donated the land to establish Plimoth Plantation, an outdoor reconstruction devoted to telling the story of the Pilgrims in the year 1627, just prior to their dispersal through what became Plymouth Colony. He needed someone to advise him on Native American exhibits, and he turned to his old friend John Otis Brew for advice. Brew, who

was also Deetz's mentor at Harvard, put the two men together, forever changing the nature of Jim's career as an anthropological archaeologist, and profoundly altering the way that the Pilgrims would come to be understood by the American public in the years ahead.

J. O. Brew, a recognized pioneer in early historic sites archaeology, had known Harry Hornblower since the latter's undergraduate days just before World War II when Hornblower was a Harvard undergraduate, digging on the early house sites of Pilgrims in the Plymouth area along with fellow members of the Harvard Excavators Club. It was just such a site, the Joseph Howland house in Kingston, Massachusetts, that brought Jim Deetz into the field of North American colonial archaeology. His excavation there in 1959 was undertaken while he was completing his very innovative analysis of Arikara ceramics from the Medicine Crow site. At the same time he was using an IBM mainframe computer to discover "stylistic coherence" on over two thousand rim sherds from central South Dakota, Deetz was using a set of 1/64-in. drill bits to date the pipe stems that would help him establish an occupation sequence for the Howland site.

After Jim's faculty appointment at Santa Barbara he became a "bicoastal" archaeologist, dividing his summers between Plymouth, where he, wife Jody, and growing family stayed in a beach house owned by Plimoth Plantation, and Santa Barbara, where he worked on several excavations in Santa Barbara County, most notably at Mission La Purísima in Lompoc, California. The first half of the 1960s was very important to Deetz's career. He began friendships and collaborations with colleagues that in some cases still continue. He attracted a loyal and talented group of students at Santa Barbara, as well as earned a huge following through his very popular introductory courses. He also taught on several occasions at his alma mater, and it was during one of these teaching stints, in the summer of 1963, that Jim discovered gravestones in the Concord, Massachusetts, cemetery.

During this period, his doctoral dissertation on the Arikara, which was published by the University of Illinois Press as *The Dynamics of Stylistic Change in Arikara Ceramics*, caught the eye of a number of prehistorians who were doing similar kinds of studies in the American Southwest, trying to link principles of social organization with artifact patterning at the attribute level. Deetz's case study correlating ceramic design to residence patterns, and by inference to rules of descent and kinship terminology, was presented in a number of forums, including a very important symposium at the 1965 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Denver. This symposium was later published in 1968 under the editorship of Lewis and Sally Binford as *New Perspectives in Archaeology*, a book that became required reading for "New Archaeologists" everywhere.

Through this and other unintended associations, Jim Deetz became for some a poster boy for "New Archaeology," though in presentation and content his work was in direct contrast to the stridency that characterized the archaeological rhetoric of the early 1960s. Mislabeled or not, Deetz joined a group of American archaeologists who became internationally known for their contributions to the general theory of anthropological archaeology, a reputation based on their apparent success at discovering patterning in archaeological data that reflected changes in domains of past human behavior of interest to students of ethnography and ethnology. Jim Deetz would soon add to his general reputation in anthropological archaeology when he and Ted Dethlefsen published their first account of the dynamics of stylistic change evident in gravestone design motifs from a large sample of New England cemeteries.

The first gravestone paper was published in 1967, the year that I met Jim Deetz for the first time, when he lectured on this subject to the introductory cultural anthropology course I was taking at Brown. Another of my teachers, Doug Anderson, had brought Deetz to my attention a year before, when the deal to bring him from Santa Barbara to Brown had been negotiated. I had never heard of James Deetz and, always having been a literal learner, I immediately wanted to know if he was mentioned in our textbook, the first volume of Gordon Willey's (1966) *An Introduction to American Archaeology*. Deetz was nowhere to be found in the text or bibliography. As a first-semester sophomore just deciding to major in anthropology, I had yet to understand the reasons for Doug Anderson's excitement. Deetz's arrival the next academic year as a professor in Brown's then-Department of Sociology and Anthropology quickly changed all that, marking the beginning of an important new chapter in his career, and a significant one for the development of the field.

The next fall, Deetz offered the introductory course in human prehistory for the first time at Brown, a course that would become one of the largest and most popular lecture courses offered at the school in that period. We used his newly-published introductory text, *Invitation to Archaeology*, one of the most innovative books of its kind ever published. In addition to using materials from the various projects he had been working on since 1958 to explain and illustrate basic concepts and techniques in archaeology, Jim developed an explicit linguistic model for artifact manufacture and use that formalized his thinking about what he termed "the mental template." In this chapter, written in 1966, Deetz anticipated his adoption of a more explicit structuralist approach to material culture in the early 1970s. These ideas began to crystallize as he developed a new course, *American Material Culture*, which he first offered in the fall of 1971, but his pursuit of this approach had received a major boost two years before when he was introduced to Henry Glassie, a folklorist who had himself just turned to structuralism as a model for understanding folk material culture.

It is fair to say that the friendship and collaboration between Deetz and Glassie was one of the major influences on the development of material culture theory during this period. Their ideas had a substantial impact on archaeological theory in general, on historical archaeology, and on the research of a range of scholars engaged in the new specialty of material culture studies. Although Deetz introduced some explicitly structuralist ideas such as "the Georgian mindset" in his 1972 analysis of ceramics and foodways in the area of Plymouth Colony, his book, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life*, published in 1977, is a culmination of his thinking and teaching during the early 1970s. It fully develops his structuralist interpretation of American material culture, which as he acknowledges owes much to the work of Glassie.

The same year that *In Small Things Forgotten* was published, Deetz left Brown and spent a year teaching at the College of William and Mary. He never returned to his teaching position at Brown, but spent the summer of 1978 putting his affairs in order at Plimoth Plantation. In late August of that year, he and his family returned to California, where Jim joined the faculty in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley. This move brought to a close a very productive decade at Plimoth Plantation, where Deetz had made so many fundamental changes in the way that the lives of the Pilgrims were interpreted to the public. As Assistant Director between 1967 and 1978, Deetz had transformed Plimoth Plantation from a mannequin-furnished commemoration of the *Mayflower* passengers to a vibrant living history museum replete with accurately-costumed character interpreters engaged in the nitty-gritty of daily life. What is more, he extended this approach to the interpretation of the local Native Americans, the Wampanoags, with their blessing and assistance. Very soon after it was developed, the Indian village at Plimoth Plantation was staffed and administered by local Native Americans, one of the first such programs of its kind in the United States.

When he departed for California, Deetz also left behind the fledgling *Parting Ways Museum of African American Ethnohistory*, an organization devoted to interpreting a small settlement of former slaves, freed after their service in the Revolutionary War and granted nearly one hundred acres of land on the outskirts of Plymouth. Excavations of this community began in the summer of 1975, with a crew made up of local African-American kids who were discovering their heritage with support from a bicentennial grant administered by the town. Although the museum never materialized, this project did much to advance the cause of African-American archaeology as an important area of research within historical archaeology, research that in this case was pursued expressly for the purpose of engaging the local minority community in the interpretation of its own past. Now such programs are commonplace, but Jim Deetz began promoting these efforts more than 25 years ago, long before "social responsibility" and "public outreach" became widely shared imperatives among the archaeological profession.

In leaving New England, Deetz also ended an important chapter for many of us who had been his graduate students at Brown. Although he would remain our advisor and mentor, the program in historical archaeology at Brown would never be the same. But he very quickly attracted a number of new Ph.D. students, including several recruited from the undergraduate program in anthropology at Cal, and others who followed him west. He began to train this new crop of students primarily

through research at Flowerdew Hundred farm in Prince George County, Virginia, a property with which he had become acquainted during his year as a visiting professor at William and Mary. He also turned in earnest to projects that took advantage of the interface between historical archaeology and folklife studies. Closest to Berkeley was his multiyear project at the abandoned coal-mining town of Somersville, California. Somewhat further away, Jim worked with a team from the American Folklife Center to document traditional lifeways in Paradise Valley, Nevada. Twenty years after his first job in the University of California system, Jim Deetz was once again dividing his research time between the two coasts.

Soon, however, he went international, expanding his active research territory to include South Africa, which he first visited in 1984. For the remainder of the 1980s, Deetz, brought graduate and undergraduate students from Berkeley to the Eastern Cape, where they worked on a number of research projects in cooperation with various South African colleagues. During this same period, he kept his summer program at Flowerdew Hundred active as well, running a series of very popular summer institutes for college teachers and a Cal field school. A number of Ph.D. dissertations have been produced from this work, and Deetz himself produced a published synthesis of his work at Flowerdew in 1993. This book, like others he has done, brought together many of the ideas he had been developing through his teaching and other writing in the prior decade.

Jim Deetz had one more cross-country move to make. In the fall of 1993, he accepted an endowed chair at the University of Virginia, leaving some students behind and bringing others with him as he had done when he moved to Berkeley from Brown 15 years earlier. Shortly after his arrival in Charlottesville, Deetz undertook a major revision of his classic *In Small Things Forgotten*, one which incorporated some of the most significant results of his research in the Chesapeake, notably his ideas about African-American cultural development in the region. At Virginia, Jim has again demonstrated his extraordinary skills as a teacher. His undergraduate offerings have attracted a large following, and he has assembled an outstanding group of doctoral students.

Still, Jim Deetz has reached that stage in his career where he is entitled to reflect on his accomplishments and wonder how others in the profession perceive him. Several years ago he remarked that "after 30 years in the business, I have first been a culture historian, then a New Archaeologist, then a structuralist, and now apparently, a passionate post-structuralist. The fact is, I am not doing things that differently from the way I did in the '60s. I don't think I have changed at all; the transformations have been in the way my work has been perceived by others. Fine! What goes around comes around, but I cannot help but wonder what kind of an archaeologist I will be in the year 2000."

The millennium is still a few years away, but The Society for Historical Archaeology has gone on the record with its collective perception of Jim Deetz, awarding him the 1997 J. C. Harrington Medal, an honor richly deserved by a scholar and teacher who has done more than any other single member of his generation to make historical archaeology a credible pursuit within the discipline of anthropology.

Aside from being a Harrington Medal winner, what kind of archaeologist will Jim Deetz be in the year 2000? It is hard to say. He has recently indicated that his digging days are over, but he is a long way from retirement. Jim has much to look forward to, both professionally and personally. The nine children he and Jody raised have produced 17 grandchildren. Jim and his second wife, Trish Scott, are hard at work on a new book, which interestingly enough takes him back to Plymouth to renew research on probate records he began over 30 years ago. Most importantly, Jim Deetz still has a great group of graduate students, who like those before them will make their contributions to the field in any number of ways. This will certainly be one of his most important legacies, and I know I speak for all of his students, past, present, and future, when I say, "Congratulations, Jim Deetz, and thank you for all that you have done and will do for us and for the discipline of anthropological archaeology."