



# J. C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology: David G. Orr

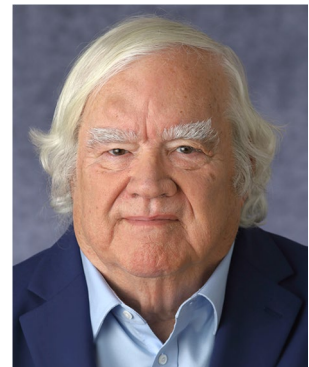
Richard Veit · Wade Catts

Accepted: 13 March 2024 / Published online: 28 March 2024  
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David G. Orr was honored with the J. C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology at the 2024 annual meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA) in Oakland, California, in recognition of his contributions to the field of historical archaeology (Fig. 1).

Dave Orr is one of the SHA's exemplary historical archaeologists. He was an early and powerful advocate for the archaeological study of African American life, material culture studies, and industrial archaeology, and was a pioneer in conflict archaeology. His academic training is as a classicist and an historian, with degrees from Ohio University, the University of Maryland, and the American Academy at Rome. He has taught at the University of Maryland, University of Pennsylvania, University of Delaware, and Temple University, and had a distinguished 30-year career with the National Park Service. Dave is closely associated with Philadelphia and is a champion of archaeology in the "City of Brotherly Love." A true renaissance archaeologist and an unceasingly active scholar, he has published and presented widely on

**Fig. 1** David G. Orr. (Photo by Lindy Powers Photography, 2024.)



topics in historical and classical archaeology, popular culture, vernacular architecture, and material culture theory. He is a bibliophile, numismatist, and, in the best sense of the term, an antiquarian. More importantly, he is a mentor and inspiration to generations of archaeologists.

Dave's eclecticism, his thirst for learning, making connections across time and space, and learning from all of life's places and experiences is epitomized in one of his oft-quoted poems. Entitled "Ithaka," by Constantine P. Cavafy, the poem reads, in part: "As you set out for Ithaka / hope your road is a long one, / full of adventure, full of discovery. / ... Keep Ithaka always in your mind / Arriving there is what you're destined for. / But don't hurry the journey at all. / Better if it lasts for years" (Cavafy 1975). If you keep in mind this philosophy of life, you will understand Dave's archaeological career.

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Dave was born on 8 September 1942, in Warren, Ohio, and was raised in northeastern Ohio—the “Old Northwest”—the American heartland where steel mills were king. Dave grew up in the Westlawn Housing Project and attended high school in Youngstown. As a young person Dave was a voracious reader and, thanks to reading and the local public library, his horizons extended well beyond Youngstown. He was interested in artifacts, objects, and material culture from an early age. Books and reading were crucial to Dave’s young development as a scholar: “Books saved me [during] my high school years, saved me from the ravages of a steel town, which was ruthless in its blatant anti-intellectual power. Books were the refuge for me, not just stepping-stones to something else. They were tickets to adventure and learning” (Veit 2019:11).

Following high school Dave attended Ohio University, in Athens, Ohio, where he earned a bachelor’s degree with honors in history. At Ohio University Dave studied pre-law, history, and herpetology. In his words, it was a “feeding frenzy” (Veit 2019:5). There he studied with Gifford Doxsee, an expert on the Middle East. Dave wrote his senior thesis on Arab nationalism in what is now Lebanon. He also met Charlie Mayes, who taught English and medieval history. Mayes would later attempt to recruit Dave to Monmouth University in New Jersey. Dave, however, had other plans.

Dave’s archaeological career began when he was an undergraduate at Ohio University. In 1963 and 1964 he participated in the River Basin Surveys run by the Smithsonian Institution under the direction of Lionel Brown. The projects were in Iowa and South Dakota during the summers and included Pony Creek, his first archaeological investigation. They proved to be a transformative experience. Dave met Waldo Wedel, Mari Sandoz, and Jim Deetz, who was studying the Arikara, and, a few years later, at Plymouth, Massachusetts, Marley Brown and Henry Glassie.

Charlie Mayes encouraged Dave to apply to the University of Maryland for graduate school. There Dave studied with Wilhelmina Jashemski, a classicist known for her two books on the gardens of Pompeii. Dave remembers Wilhelmina this way: “Jashemski powerfully taught me landscape archaeology. ... She taught me associative force; the community of objects, you can’t tell one thing without the other. It isn’t just the house shrines, but where they are” (Veit

2019:8). Dave’s dissertation focused on the house shrines of Pompeii. With Jashemski, Dave even excavated a Roman vineyard at Pompeii that was later replanted and is now, once again, producing wine.

Dave earned his Ph.D. from the University of Maryland in 1972. Previously he had won the Rome Prize of the American Academy in Rome in 1971. The prize is awarded to scholars who represent the highest standard of excellence and who are in the early or middle stages of their careers. Not only did he receive it in 1972, but it was renewed for a second year! Dave headed to Italy with his wife Linda and his growing family. In Rome he fell under the spell of Frank Brown from Yale University and John D’Arms from the University of Michigan.

When Dave returned to the States in 1973, his interests shifted profoundly. Almost immediately he received a job offer from Dr. Anthony N. B. Garvan of the Department of American Civilization at the University of Pennsylvania. His background in classics made him the perfect scholar to study Philadelphia, the Athens, or perhaps Rome, of America. Dave taught with such luminaries as Garvan, John Cotter, Don Yoder, and Murray Murphey. John Cotter, a previous Harrington Medal recipient (1984), became a lifelong friend, colleague, and mentor. Dave taught courses in vernacular architecture, material culture, industrial archaeology, and popular culture. Graduate students who studied with Dave include Bernie Herman, Jacqueline Thibaut, Brooke Blades, and Mark and Kate Ohno. At Penn, Dave co-taught field courses with Cotter at Mill Creek and at Valley Forge. He was also involved with the Museum Institute for Conservation Archaeology, the contracting arm of Penn.

One of the recurring themes of Dave’s career has been his ability to draw from the classics to better understand the life and culture of early America. It is not unusual in an Orr lecture for Dave to begin reciting Latin or Greek verse, explaining the derivation of words and making historical and scholarly linkages among seemingly diverse subjects. Dave taught a course called “Classical America during the Revolution” as part of a National Endowment for the Arts grant with the American Philosophical Association and lectured widely on this theme. As he notes, almost anywhere people look they can see classical forms employed in early American buildings.

In 1978, when John Cotter retired from the National Park Service (NPS) Mid-Atlantic Region,

Dave replaced him as regional archaeologist. Dave's Park Service career as a supervisory archaeologist lasted 30 years. Based out of Philadelphia, he worked in various capacities for the NPS. He was part of the reconnaissance team for three new parks, including New River Gorge. Dave sees his involvement of the public in NPS archaeology as a significant contribution of his career. He consistently included the public, broadly defined, in his projects for the NPS. As Dave noted a few years ago: "I rarely excavated without public interns or volunteers" (Veit 2019:15). Dave received the Park Service's Crystal Owl Award, a national award recognizing excellence in interpretation.

While with the Park Service, Dave introduced and implemented a summer intern program from 1980 to 1992 with the students of Steve McCarter at Lower Merion High School. Together they had students do archaeological projects at Gettysburg, Valley Forge, Fredericksburg, and Appomattox Court House. Reflecting on his career, Dave says: "The program I am most proud of is the student intern program, with Stephen McCarter" (Veit 2019:14). The students took a high school course with McCarter, and then Dave taught them about historical artifacts. Dave and Steve were also involved with the People to People Student Ambassador Program, a travel service offering domestic and international travel opportunities to middle and high school students. One year he took students to China to study, tour, and, in some cases, excavate. Continuing his interest in things Roman, he codirected an Earthwatch project in both Pompeii (1994–1997) and nearby Cumae (1999–2001).

From 1982 until 2007 Orr taught part-time at the University of Delaware (UD) and served on the Delaware State Review Board for the National Register for two terms. In the 1980s, with the help of a National Endowment for the Humanities grant, he developed a UD course taught at the Hagley Museum called "Exemplary Teaching in Historical Archaeology." He taught this course for several years and published a Hagley Monograph on it, titled *Historical Archaeology and Museum Interpretation: An Exemplary Course* (Orr 1989). It was during this class that Dave and Wade Catts formally entered into the mentor/student relationship that has lasted for four decades.

Dave's years at Penn saw him develop and mount several important exhibits, including one on the ephemera of the political material culture of the

"Protest Period." The idea was to gather the material culture of the present so that the future would have a past. Cesar Chavez sent Dave a personal letter and a whole box of stuff. One of the companies that made the real protest buttons, Horn Company, made a button advertising the exhibit. Dave would later publish an article on the material titled "By Any Means Necessary," attracting the notice of the Smithsonian Institution.

Ever a student of popular culture, Dave collected McDonald's Happy Meals and developed an exhibit of the ephemera of McDonald's called "McZibit." Dave's McDonald's work with popular disposable culture was featured in a mystery novel by Ed Naha, *Razzle-Dazzle*—what better way to influence popular culture than through pulp fiction? Dave had a special interest in the Volkswagen Beetle and its evolution from the people's car to the icon of the counterculture movement.

Recognizing the connections between architecture and archaeology, Dave was an early member of the Vernacular Architecture Forum. In 1998 he was also a founding member of the Philadelphia Archaeological Forum, for which he served as the first president. Dave was an early proponent of industrial archaeology, founding the Oliver Evans Chapter (Philadelphia) of the Society for Industrial Archaeology, where he also served as first president. While at Penn, in 1975, Dave developed and taught the first course on industrial archaeology offered in the United States.

In the 1980s, working for the Park Service at Gettysburg, Petersburg, Fredericksburg, Fort McHenry, Fort Necessity, Valley Forge, and Yorktown, Dave developed an enduring interest in the archaeology of warfare and its impacts. During the summers of 1983 and 1984 he excavated at City Point, Virginia, discovering the site of General Ulysses S. Grant's headquarters cabin. This work is represented in coedited publications, such as *Look to the Earth* (Geier and Winter 1996), *Huts in History* (Orr et al. 2006), and *The Historical Archaeology of Revolutionary War Encampments of Washington's Army* (Sgarlata et al. 2019). He attended the founding meeting of the Fields of Conflict Conference in Glasgow in 2000. He is consistently on the cutting edge, stressing the importance of understanding the people involved in warfare and the full impact of war on society, not simply the battlefield. He continues to work on sites of conflict. Dave subscribes to a holistic approach to cultural history

and research, and the ancillary idea that excavation should be done publicly and interpreted aggressively.

Dave retired from the National Park Service in 2006. He had already been teaching at Temple and the university soon hired him as a full-time faculty member. There he took on a whole new group of Ph.D. students with new projects in Philadelphia; at Timbuctoo, New Jersey; and Washington's Headquarters and Washington's Chapel at Valley Forge. His doctoral students include Karin Boon, Chris Barton, Matt Kalos, Dierdre Kelleher, Jesse West Rosenthal, Kevin Donaghy, Mara Kaktins, Katie Cavallo, and Joe Blondino. Dave's teaching legacy of students, spanning four decades of teaching, are today engaged not only in professional archaeological work, but also in nonarchaeological jobs, carrying into their daily activities the appreciation for material culture and the past that Dave provided. Dave describes the unique relationship between teacher and students as "a dual relationship, learning from students and teaching them. A good teacher goes both ways. The point is that the best teachers are the best listeners. If someone asked what I am today, I am a student. I have a whole family of students from Penn, Rome, Delaware, and Temple."

While on the faculty at Temple University, Dave helped produce a movie on James Oronoko Dexter. Dexter was a major antebellum African American leader. Dave is a champion of African American archaeology and has studied and advocated for the preservation of significant African American historical sites, such as Timbuctoo in New Jersey and the African Union Church Cemetery in Polktown, Delaware. In 2012, Dave's career was recognized by his peers when he received the Lifetime Achievement Award in Archaeology by the Mid-Atlantic Archaeological Conference.

Dave retired from Temple University on 5 December 2014. Tragically, his wife Linda, to whom he had been married since 1967, passed away two days after his retirement. However, Dave persevered, lecturing at the late David Starbuck's field schools in the Adirondacks and working on projects, including excavations at Red Bank, Princeton, Brandywine, and Fort Casimir battlefields.

An active scholar, Dave has published and coedited books on the Lenape, *People of the Minisink: Papers from the Delaware Water Gap Symposium* (Orr and Campana 1991); *The Scope of Historical Archaeology*

(Orr and Crozier 1984); an edited volume honoring John Cotter, *Witness to the Past: The Life and Works of John L. Cotter* (Roberts and Orr 2007); and a volume on the *Historical Archaeology of the Delaware Valley* (Veit and Orr 2014). Besides books, Dave has published a prodigious number of articles and book chapters focusing on material culture—the material culture of protest, duck decoys, Roman popular religion, historical archaeology, vernacular architecture, popular culture, industrial archaeology, military-sites archaeology, historical American ceramics, and African American archaeology. Demonstrating his commitment to scholarship and dissemination of his research, Dave's essays and articles have been published in a range of books and periodicals, including *Ceramics in America*, *Historical Archaeology*, *Industrial Archaeology*, *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, *CRM Bulletin*, and *Archaeology*.

Today, Dave continues to participate in fieldwork and write. He is an inspiration to fellow historical archaeologists and is renowned for his consistent generosity and collegiality to his peers. Many have been gifted "Sun Plates" and are fondly referred to as the "Knights of the Sun Plate." Dave created his award in about 2010 and has presented the plates "to those individuals who have made, in my humble opinion, outstanding contributions in history, archaeology, and preservation." Dave further notes that presenting the Sun Plate "at the twilight of my life is a way of recognizing individuals who have influenced me for the better." He lives in Delaware City in a wonderful historic home, called "Orriana."

As he has throughout his career, Dave delights in engaging with and informing the public about the importance of archaeology and its impacts on current life through material culture, most recently at John Dickinson Plantation in Delaware and at Red Bank Battlefield Park in New Jersey.

Dave has a remarkable ability to bridge disciplines, move easily from Pompeii to Philadelphia, and make what he says and does accessible to the public. This ability to make connections and communicate those connections he traces to his mentors: "I learned from Pemberton and Jashemski that nothing stands alone, everything is part of something else. What does it mean? Why did they make it? It is the same thing I learned in the gardens of Pompeii. I also learned what a family of scholars really should do is excel in learning" (Veit 2019:9).

David G. Orr is an historical archaeologist who has made international contributions to the interdisciplinary study of material culture. His expertise ranges from classical Italy to American popular culture, along the way advancing scholarship in conflict archaeology, African-diaspora archaeology, industrial archaeology, and the archaeology of the 20th century. “Although all of my degrees are in history,” Dave says, “I agree with Garry Wheeler Stone that the two meld very well and that history and archaeology are linked disciplines” (Veit 2019:17). His international academic career and decades of public service with the National Park Service and innumerable advisory and community boards have informed his scholarly approach. Dave’s interests are global and catholic, and he is a bibliophile with a prodigious memory and a synthetic mind. If you are fortunate enough to be on his email list, you will receive a daily education in the importance of “small things forgotten,” material culture, and the countless diachronic and synchronic connections of objects with our lives. His scholarly contributions to material culture incorporate perspectives from anthropology, history, philosophy, classical studies, literature, folklore and folklife.

Dave has touched the lives of countless formal and informal students. Dave’s renaissance and eclectic approach to teaching is a priceless contribution to the field of historical archaeology. Regarding his teaching, he says: “The emphasis throughout my career was on teaching. Like Cotter’s favorite saying, I always thought I was “a witness to the past” (Veit 2019:17).

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