Reflections on Participating in the Airlie House Meetings

Bill Lipe, January 31, 2023

The Airlie House meetings consisted of six weeklong seminars held at the Airlie House Conference Center in Virginia during the latter half of 1974. I was pleased and excited to be one of the participants. The seminar topics were “A Consideration of Law in Archaeology,” “Cultural Resource Management,” “Guidelines for the Preparation and Evaluation of Archaeological Reports,” “The Crisis in Communication,” “Archaeology and Native Americans,” and “Certification and Accreditation.” The meetings were proposed and organized for the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) by Charles R. McGimsey and Hester Davis, with funding from a grant to the SAA from the National Park Service. The goal was to describe major aspects of the current status of the archaeological profession in the United States and to explore possible future directions in light of the major trends and changes evident in the early 1970s. McGimsey had been elected SAA president in 1973 and was scheduled to take office in June 1974, just prior to the start of the Airlie House seminars.

To promote efficient use of the Airlie House facilities, the seminars were paired and convened between July 31 and November 2, 1974. Draft versions of the seminar reports were circulated at these meetings, and each seminar had one or a few “compilers” tasked with producing final versions that would be published. McGimsey and Davis ambitiously hoped that finished versions of the report could be distributed to SAA members by the next Annual Meeting in May 1975. Not surprisingly, the numerous real-world engagements of the busy people involved resulted in the 124-page volume *The Management of Archeological Resources: The Airlie House Report* not being printed and circulated until early 1977 (McGimsey and Davis 1977)—a modest delay by real-world standards, at least in academia.

As one of the surviving participants in the Airlie House seminars, I was asked (email from Karen Mudar, January 9, 2023) to contribute some comments on that experience to a joint SAA and National Park Service committee for possible use in a webinar about the future of American archaeology. It was suggested that I respond to three general questions (underlined below).

1. How did I come to be invited to participate in the Airlie House seminars—in my case, on the one devoted to cultural resource management (CRM)?

I felt well prepared for the Airlie meetings because of my career trajectory. In 1958–1960, I had been a crew chief on the University of Utah section of the Glen Canyon Archaeological Project, and my 1966 Yale PhD was based on data from that project (summary published in Lipe 1970). “The GCP” was one of the largest and in some years the largest archaeological project in the United States, designed to “salvage” data on sites in Arizona and Utah affected by damming the Colorado River to produce Lake Powell. The Museum of Northern Arizona (MNA) and the University of Utah each had a geographic section of the work.

In 1964, I became a faculty member at Binghamton University (referred to at the time as SUNY-Binghamton) and in 1972, I took the job of assistant director for research at the MNA, a well-known nonprofit institution in Flagstaff. At the time, the MNA was heavily and increasingly engaged in contracted archaeological projects managed by Alexander (Lex) Lindsay and biological projects managed by Steven W. Carothers. In 1972, I also started a NSF-funded, multiyear settlement pattern study of Cedar Mesa, southeastern Utah, co-directed with R. G. Matson.

In the early 1970s, Lex Lindsay (who I knew well from his role in directing Glen Canyon fieldwork for the MNA) and a number of other Southwest archaeologists met several times to discuss adapting to the legal, disciplinary, and financial changes rapidly taking place in US archaeology—more or less the same set of concerns that motivated McGimsey and Davis to organize the Airlie House seminars. In January 1974, Lindsay organized and the MNA hosted a well-attended meeting in Farmington, New Mexico, that laid the groundwork for the two-day Denver Cultural Resource Management Conference, held in early April 1974. Lex Lindsay and I presided over the two days of sessions. Among the 125 attendees were representatives from several federal agencies, as well as the incoming SAA president Charles R. McGimsey.

After the meeting, and with staff help, I was able to rapidly assemble a proceedings volume that included all the presentations and edited transcripts of the associated discussions. The MNA published this in September 1974 as Number 14 in its Technical Series (Lipe and Lindsay 1974). Also early in 1974, I published an article titled “A Conservation Model for American Archaeology” (Lipe 1974), versions of which had been presented in 1971 and 1972 in SAA meeting symposia focused on cultural resource conservation and salvage archaeology. This article became available close to the date of the Denver meeting, and I think some participants had read it.

2) From my perspective, how did the Airlie House report impact the development of US archaeology?

In the twentieth century, growing awareness of environmental damage and the loss of historical and archaeological sites due to federal actions resulted in various programs designed to fund “salvage archaeology.” Archaeologists would be brought in after plans for projects had been finalized and allowed (and sometimes with funds administered by the National Park Service) to recover what they could. In the 1960s, a growing “environmental movement” coalesced around opposition to federal projects that destroyed major archaeological and historical sites, or major aspects of the natural environment. Especially important were the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969. Under the NHPA, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) and the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) programs were created and began to generate regulations broadly designed to help preserve historical and archaeological sites. In 1971, President Richard Nixon was convinced to issue Executive Order 11593, which required the federal government to “provide leadership in preserving, restoring, and maintaining the historic and cultural environment of the Nation.” Federal agencies were directed to inventory and assess the significance of cultural resources potentially affected by an agency action and to avoid demolishing or substantially altering such resources until the ACHP had been given an opportunity to comment on the proposed action. This paved the way for the initial promulgation in 1974 of initial regulations for Section 106 of the NHPA that helped turn that law into a planning as well as a commemorative tool. Also, the Archaeological and Historical Preservation Act of 1974 (informally called the Moss-Bennett legislation) was signed into law just a few weeks before the start of the Airlie House conference. It thoroughly amended the 1960 Reservoir Salvage Act, and required all federal agencies to take archaeological resources into account when executing, funding, or licensing projects (McGimsey and Davis 1977:11–14; McManamon 2018:32).

My role in the Airlie House conference was as one of the participants in the cultural resource management seminar; I was also (along with Mark Grady and R. Bruce McMillan) one of the “compilers” tasked with taking our seminar’s “prepared drafts along with all of the daily notes, and working these somewhat discursive documents into a coherent whole” (McGimsey and Davis 1977:6). It was originally hoped that Airlie House report could be edited, printed, and circulated by the SAA Annual Meeting in May 1975. This short deadline was not met, and most of the seminar reports underwent some amount of revision with the CRM seminar report taking the prize. In the Editor’s Preface to the CRM seminar report, McGimsey notes, “An initial draft was sent to seminar participants in May 1975 and elicited considerable additional correspondence. At this point, [Mark] Grady and Lipe extensively reworked it, [and] added a lot of material” (McGimsey and Davis 1977:25).

By 1974, archaeologists and historians were beginning to take advantage of the opportunities and requirements offered by new laws and regulations to begin to identify and evaluate cultural resources at the project planning stage. The US archaeological community was widely aware that significant and large-scale changes were underway in how and why archaeology is done. The Airlie House report attempted to characterize the major changes that were occurring in the legal and disciplinary systems upon which archaeology depended. It provided a useful and forward-looking framework intended to help archaeologists, federal agency cultural resource managers, and tribal representatives envision the whole field of US archaeology and to accommodate to the changes that were occurring. The report is thus a kind of snapshot of systems in the midst of change, and something that the archaeological community can look back on to gain perspective on how the field of American archaeology subsequently developed some of its present contours.

The CRM seminar report is the longest of the seminar reports in the 1977 Airlie House volume, occupying pages 25 through 63. It attempts to be a fairly comprehensive introduction to the planning-based stance taken by the ACHP and NEHP and that was being brought into practice by new regulations designed to implement this stance. The main subheadings of the report are (1) “Interpretation of the Laws” (a long section, with definitions of many of the terms employed in planning-based cultural resource management), (2) “Sponsor-Professional Relationships” (which takes into account the needs and responsibilities of federal agencies as well as CRM workers), (3) “Planning” (devoted to project planning stages and related types of archaeological studies), (4) “Contracting” (describes types of contracts, legal requirements and obligations, budget estimates, etc.), (5) a brief section on “The Review Process,” (6) “The Institutional Base” (describes staffing and facilities characteristic of established universities or museums but recognizes ongoing increase in independent consultants and consulting firms), and (7) “Role of State and Regional Planning” (focuses on the role of the SHPO, including state responsibilities in Section 106 compliance and review of the cultural resource portions of Environmental Impact Statements, and some suggestions for regional planning CRM workshops).

My recollection is that many if not most of the revisions that had substantially expanded the initial draft of the CRM report were suggested by Mark Grady, who had extensive current experience working with federal agencies to meet requirements of NEPA and NHPA. At the time, Mark was the director of the CRM Section of the Arizona State Museum, and in 1976 he became associate director of research for the Southern Methodist University archaeology program.

The Airlie House CRM seminar report could have served as an outline for a textbook on cultural resource management. I’m sure its presence in the Airlie House report was useful to a number of archaeologists who, like myself, were converting from a “salvage archaeology” to a “cultural resource management” approach. Seminar participant Mark Grady might have produced such a CRM book had he been able to follow through on plans to take a faculty position at San Diego State University starting in fall 1978; there, he was to be involved in establishing a contract research program and in training students in cultural resource management. Tragically, this was not to be, as Mark died in the summer of 1978 from injuries in a traffic accident (Vivian 1980).

3) What did the report miss? What could have been done differently or better?

An example of changes that were in process but not resolved until shortly after the conference is provided by the report of seminar six: “Certification and Accreditation.” Governmental agencies and other users of archaeological studies mandated by CRM regulations were increasingly requesting assurance that these studies were being done by qualified archaeologists. At the May 1974 Annual Meeting in Washington, DC, the SAA Executive Board resolved that it “endorses the principle of certification of archaeologists and archaeological institutions and that a committee be constituted to spell out the minimum qualifications of archaeologists and those of institutions, corporations, and other organizations which propose to carry out archaeological research” (McGimsey and Davis 1977:101).

In response to this resolution, an SAA Committee on Certification was appointed in May 1974. Its members then were invited to become participants in the Airlie House seminar six on “Certification and Accreditation.” Their committee report comprises the text of the Airlie House report for seminar six. The primary recommendation was that “the SAA should establish a National Register of Professional Archaeologists (NRPA) which would list qualified archaeologists and their supporting institutions” (McGimsey and Davis 1977:102). This recommendation was approved by members attending the 1975 Annual Meeting, and subsequently by a mail ballot. In the Editor’s Preface to the seminar six report, McGimsey and Davis (1977:97–99) review what happened next with the NRPA plan.

In 1975, despite the SAA’s membership showing enthusiasm about the Society sponsoring a National Register of Professional Archaeologists, SAA officers had begun to be concerned about possible legal complications associated with situating the proposed registry in a broad-based membership organization such as the SAA. Also, archaeologists having primary affiliation with other organizations protested having to join SAA to become certified. The existing SAA Interim Committee on Professional Standards was expanded and charged with exploring a range of options for situating the registry. (I was added to that expanded committee and attended its meeting in Fayetteville, Arkansas, in January 1976.)

The most immediate result was the formation of a new organization—the Society of Professional Archaeologists (SOPA)—that would exist to develop and maintain written standards for professional behavior and to register individuals who qualified as professional archaeologists. Appendix C of the Airlie House report (McGimsey and Davis 1977:119–124) publishes the several codes and standards that the expanded Interim Committee on Professional Standards approved in 1976. Promulgating standards for professionalism by individuals and institutions and maintaining a Register of Professional Archaeologists continued to be the main activities of SOPA for the next 30 or so years.

In the mid-1990s, SOPA was disbanded and its activities assumed by the newly created Register of Professional Archaeologists (RPA). This is now sponsored by (in addition to the SAA) the Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA), the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA), and the Archaeology Division of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). “Partner” relationships have also been established between RPA and the American Cultural Resource Association (ACRA; a trade association for firms engaged in CRM work) and the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA; a professional organization primarily representing archaeologists in the UK). During my term as SAA president (1995–1997) I was privileged to join with other SAA Board members to work toward formation of the RPA, which now maintains a much enlarged registry of professional archaeologists.

Some final comments: although the Airlie House report in general did a good job of identifying trends affecting the practice of archaeology, I could not find any discussion of the ongoing trend of many more women becoming archaeologists. When I started as a crew chief on the Glen Canyon project in the late 1950s, those doing the fieldwork and writing the reports were virtually all men, with women primarily filling lab positions. But that division of labor began to change substantially in the 1960s with the reemergence of a feminist movement (that much earlier had secured for women the right to vote). Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963, the federal Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, and the National Organization for Women was founded in 1966. By the late 1960s, women were moving into US archaeological careers in increasing numbers, especially in governmental agencies and contract organizations. Yet the Airlie House report lists only 10 women and 29 men as 1974 seminar participants (and McGimsey and Davis each got counted three times because each participated in three different seminars as part of their leadership roles in the conference). And I could not find in the 1977 report a discussion of this important trend.

In summary, I think the Airlie House report provided a useful overview of the state of American archaeology in the mid-1970s, structured around identifying recent and ongoing changes in the six broad areas examined in the six Airlie House seminars. It was intended to foster future acceptance of practical accommodations and actions responsive to these changes but not primarily to provide detailed predictions of what those changes might be. Looking back after 50 years, we can see that some of the changes that were taking place in the mid-1970s had more rapid and profound effects than others in shaping American archaeology in the subsequent decades. However, I believe the Airlie House seminars served well to allow the profession to “sit back and review where it was going and thus suggest how to get there” as expressed by McGimsey in his Preface to the Airlie House report (McGimsey and Davis 1977:iv).

I personally was excited and energized by the opportunity to participate in the Airlie House conference, and look back on it as a major high point in a long career in American archaeology.

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Signed: William D. Lipe, January 31, 2023