

A NEW ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE NEW DEAL

THE RISE OF HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE 1930S

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Historical archaeology—the archaeology of the Modern World (approximately the last 500 years of human history)—has its disciplinary roots in the historic preservation movement of the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Pykles 2008). Historical archaeology's true institutional beginnings, however, are tied to the federally sponsored archaeology projects conducted under the auspices of the New Deal programs of the 1930s. Chief among those projects in terms of the development of historical archaeology in the United States were the 1934–1941 excavations at Jamestown, Virginia, directed by J. C. Harrington (Figure 1). During this critical time in the history of the field, Harrington established some of the fundamental methods and practices used by historical archaeologists today and did much to promote and legitimize the emerging discipline. As a result of these efforts, Harrington is widely recognized as the “founding father” of historical archaeology in the United States (Miller 1998:5).

There are numerous isolated examples of excavations at U.S. historic sites from the seventeenth through early twentieth centuries, some even at the site of Jamestown (Hosmer 1981; Linebaugh 2005; Schuyler 2001). However, it was not until the passage of the Historic Sites Act of 1935, which clearly outlined the National Park Service's preservation mandate, coupled with the generously funded New Deal work programs, that the preservation movement in the United States reached a level of coherent organization and professionalism, under which historical archaeology gained an institutional foothold (Hosmer 1981).

The preservation efforts at Jamestown were central to this development. Leading the way early on was The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA), which acquired a portion of the original Jamestown town site in 1893 and eight years later (1901–1902) sponsored exploratory excavations of the ruins behind the old church tower, the

only standing architectural remains from the seventeenth century. It was not until 1934, however, when the National Park Service (NPS) secured possession of the main portion of Jamestown Island, that a large-scale archaeological program at the site was instituted, relying on the labor of young African-American men enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Because there were few, if any, professionally trained archaeologists with any experience, let alone interest, in excavating historic sites at this time, the NPS looked to Henry C.

Forman, an architectural historian, to direct the new Jamestown archaeology program. From the beginning, the NPS initiated a peculiar division of labor between Forman's crew and that of the other bona-fide archaeologists hired to assist in the project. Essentially, Forman and his crew were to excavate the foundations scattered throughout the townsite, while the trained archaeologists and their men were assigned to dig in the “non-architectural” parts of the site, searching for things like colonial-period ditches and fence rows that would help delineate historic property boundaries. Highlighting this bizarre division of labor was an alleged “three-foot rule” that forbade the archaeologists from coming closer than three feet to a foundation in their excavations (Harrington 1984:35).

Over the next two years this bifurcated program of excavation led to jealousy, mistrust, and in-fighting, which ultimately resulted in the resignation, dismissal, or reassign-



Figure 1. Jean Carl Harrington (1901–1998), the “founding father” of historical archaeology in the United States. Courtesy of the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

ment of the entire supervisory staff in the summer of 1936 (Harrington 1984:36, 1994:4; Hosmer 1981:612). Into this void stepped J. C. Harrington (Figure 1), who at the time was completing graduate work in archaeology at the University of Chicago. Harrington, in many ways, was seen as the ideal candidate for the Jamestown job. Prior to enrolling in graduate school to study archaeology, he had earned a bachelor's degree in Architectural Engineering at the University of Michigan and worked as an architect in both New Mexico and Indiana. Significantly, as part of his undergraduate education he spent the summer of 1923 working with the School for American Research in Santa Fe, making measured drawings of nine early Spanish Mission churches and visiting prominent archaeologists, including Edgar L. Hewett and Alfred V. Kidder, at their excavations. It was during this time Harrington developed more than a passing interest in archaeology. When the Great Depression seized the U.S. economy, however, in the early 1930s, Harrington lost his architectural job in Indiana and was faced with one of three choices: "either working for the Government, selling apples, or going back to school and doing graduate work" (Harrington and Harrington 1971:2). Although he chose the latter, enrolling at the University of Chicago in 1932, it was only four years later when the NPS offered him the job at Jamestown (Harrington 1994; Miller 1998; Pykles 2010).

The NPS saw Harrington's background in architecture and his graduate training in archaeology as the ideal suite of skills for the Jamestown archaeology project. Like other historical archaeological projects at the time, the digs at Jamestown were architecturally oriented. Emerging as they did from an interest in preserving and interpreting the historic built environment, the goals of these early excavations were "to uncover foundations and secure architectural information about the original buildings...for the purpose of better on-site interpretation for the visiting public." (Harrington 1984:31–32). Artifacts, when collected, were "viewed as secondary items appended to architecture and serving the goals of restoration" with the result that "the museum case rather than the scholarly monograph is the benefactor" (Schuyler 1975:3–4). This emphasis on historic site restoration dominated the new field in its early years. Indeed, the majority of archaeologists involved early on with this kind of work used the term coined by Harrington himself to describe their activities—"historic site archaeology" (Harrington 1952). This is perhaps best illustrated by the way the Jamestown artifacts were treated during the two years of excavation preceding Harrington's arrival. Referring to the situation as "the great tragedy of Jamestown," Harrington noted that "Instead of keeping artifacts together for each feature or grid unit for later comparative study, each class of object was stored together—glass bottles, iron hinges, clay pipes, etc." (Harrington 1984:35). This resulted in an amazing assemblage of seventeenth-century material culture, but, unfortunately,

with absolutely no context. To his credit, during the five years (1936–1941) in which he presided over the Jamestown dig, Harrington reversed this practice and began to record the provenience of recovered artifacts and store them by excavation units, rather than by type.

Harrington's contributions to the formalization of historical archaeology in the United States, however, go far beyond his methods in the field and lab. Indeed, his greatest contributions, and perhaps the principal reason he is considered the "founding father" of historical archaeology, were his efforts to make this new kind of archaeology at Jamestown publicly visible and legitimate. To appreciate this fully it is important to understand the cultural and intellectual climate in which Harrington's archaeological work at Jamestown took place. As the nation struggled with the economic woes of the Great Depression, political and intellectual leaders began to promote a usable past, one that sought to inspire the public with a new sense of nationalism and provide a remedy for the depressed morale of the citizenry at large. The passage of the 1935 Historic Sites Act and the historical work assigned to many of the New Deal work programs, including the CCC excavations at Jamestown, can be understood as part of this overall history-making agenda (Hosmer 1981; Pykles 2008; Schuyler 1976). Indeed, all of the historians, archaeologists, architects, and other researchers involved in the historical programs of the New Deal served as "missionaries who gave American history a new dimension" (Hosmer 1981:6).

In addition to participating in the nationalistic proselytizing program of the time, Harrington viewed his work at Jamestown as an effort "to spread the gospel of historical archaeology" (Harrington 1984:41). One of the first things he did upon arriving at Jamestown in 1936 was take down the high board fence erected by his predecessors to keep "the curious and bothersome tourists away from the excavations." Not only did Harrington recognize that "such an attitude...was quite inconsistent with the policies of and philosophy of both the APVA and the National Park Service," but he also realized that "the CCC (and the Depression) would not last forever." Thus, sensing that "the public understanding and acceptance of historical archaeology was essential," and that "The Jamestown project presented a golden opportunity to promote this cause," Harrington and his colleagues took various measures to showcase and interpret historical archaeology to the visiting public, providing one of the earliest examples of public archaeology in the United States (Harrington 1984:38; see also Harrington and Harrington 1970, and Pykles 2006). One of the most impressive efforts in this regard was a program developed by Harrington's future wife, Virginia Sutton (one of the first woman rangers employed by the NPS), called "This Week at the Excavations," which involved a weekly exhibit of the archaeology work being performed and daily, guided tours of the excavations (Figure 2).



Figure 2. J. C. Harrington and his future wife Virginia Sutton interpreting the excavations at Jamestown to visitors in 1938. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Colonial National Historic Park.

Another important part of this effort involved the construction of a laboratory facility with a public corridor and large glass windows through which visitors to Jamestown could observe the CCC men reconstructing the artifacts coming out of the excavations (Figure 3) (Harrington 1984; Harrington and Harrington 1971).

In addition to exposing the public visitors at Jamestown to historical archaeology, Harrington also used the spoken and printed word to promote the new field among his archaeological, historical, and like-minded peers. One notable example comes from early in his archaeological career when he gave a speech at the American Association of Museums, which was later published as an article in *The Regional Review* (a monthly periodical of the NPS), in which he extolled the virtues of the new kind of archaeology taking place at Jamestown. The main purpose of the article was to “illustrate the manner in which archeological and documentary research work together, each supplementing, interpreting, and verifying the facts brought to light by the other.” In making this claim, Harrington was well aware of other kinds of archaeology that similarly utilized the written record (e.g., Classical archaeology). But, whereas history and archaeology were often relegated to separate spheres and time periods in other parts of the world, Harrington argued that he and his colleagues were doing things differently at Jamestown. “Here,” he declared, “historical research and archeological research are working hand in hand,” creating “an ever-expanding body of knowledge made possible by the combined activities of several fields of specialization.” Perhaps the most important point made in the article, however, was what Harrington identified as “the most significant contribution of the work at Jamestown,” namely “that a great quantity of historical knowledge can be obtained by careful,

painstaking archeological research, no matter how recent the site” (emphasis mine). This was, indeed, a “new approach to the study of historic sites,” and Harrington was at its forefront (Harrington 1940).

Significantly, the Jamestown excavations figured prominently in the continuing development of historical archaeology even after Harrington left Jamestown to become the Eastern Regional Archeologist for the NPS. In that capacity Harrington witnessed the growing numbers of excavations at historic sites across the country, “for the impact of the Jamestown digging had really been felt, particularly in the National Park Service” (Harrington 1984:40). Furthermore, many of Harrington’s early influential publications relied on examples from his work at Jamestown to illustrate the importance of the emerging field (see Harrington 1952, 1955, 1965).

By the 1960s, when historical archaeology emerged as a truly professional discipline, highlighted by the establishment of the Society for Historical Archaeology in 1967, many of the discipline’s leaders at that time, including Harrington himself, had been active participants in one of the various archaeology projects at Jamestown since the 1930s (Harrington 1984). John L. Cotter, the SHA’s first president, for example, directed additional excavations at Jamestown from 1954 to 1956, and did much to further promote and establish historical archaeology as a legitimate scholarly discipline (Schuyler 2003). Given the role his excavations at Jamestown played in the formation and development of the discipline, it is not surprising that, fifteen years after its founding, the Society for Historical Archaeology created the J. C. Harrington Medal to honor those who, like Harrington, have made life-long contributions to the discipline (Figure 4).



Figure 3. CCC enrollees reconstructing pottery in a field laboratory at Jamestown. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Historic Photograph Collection.



Figure 4: The J. C. Harrington Medal of the Society for Historical Archaeology. Courtesy of Robert L. Schuyler.

Through his fieldwork, publications, and public outreach Harrington did more than anyone else at the time to establish and promote historical archaeology as a viable field of inquiry. But, in the end, it is also important to remember the critical role of federal support and funding in the development of the field. Indeed, without the New Deal there might have never been this new kind of archaeology.

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