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## ***Historical Archaeology: Why the Past Matters***

Barbara J. Little

Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2007

207 pp., 11 figures, bibliography, index; \$59 (cloth)/\$22.95 (paperback).

ISBN: 978-1-59874-022-6

### **Reviewed by Thad M. Van Bueren**

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This eloquent and thought provoking book offers an introduction to why historical archaeologists are passionate about their subject and how those practitioners are striving to make their work socially relevant. Written in an engaging and accessible manner that is quite suitable for an introductory university course, professionals will also find a great deal to admire and ponder in this excellent overview by noted scholar and National Register of Historic Places archaeologist Dr. Barbara J. Little. This volume provides one of the clearest explanations I've encountered for why historical archaeology matters and deserves public support.

Little's focus on the social relevance of historical archaeology differs substantially from other broad treatments of historical archaeology such as Ivor Noel Hume's (1969) classic introduction to methods or more recent treatments by Orser (1996), Hall and Silliman (2006), and others. As such, it is a welcome addition. The soul-searching reflected in this book is not just a frivolous side show, but the main course for most practicing professionals—and with very good reason. An overwhelming majority of us now make our livelihoods, or at least some portion of them, as a direct result of laws intended to yield public benefit. But what exactly are those benefits?

The cornerstones of mandates like the National Historic Preservation Act involve justifying the importance of archaeological research and sharing the results of that work with the public. Nowhere is that effort more robustly engaged than in the arena of historical archaeology. Making the case for the importance of historical archaeology is often demanding, precisely because it is judged both as more familiar and better

documented than the more exotic and remote past. That familiarity has provided an opening for an archaeology of historic sites that is more directly relevant to local communities, something Little quite ably explores. She also provides a good explanation and many examples of how melding different lines of evidence (documents, materials, and testimony) yield results not possible through a separate consideration of those sources.

The book is divided into four major sections that cover the general goals of historical archaeology, issues that its practitioners care about, a survey of well-chosen projects that illustrate those issues, and a concluding section that emphasizes public engagement. Each section contains a number of short chapters that explore various dimensions of those broad topics. She defines the focus of historical archaeology as work conducted at sites occupied since the expansion of European global hegemony, and makes an effort to consider work outside of the United States, although most examples are drawn from American soil.

The first section considers the historical origins of the field and how various laws have influenced the trajectory of its development from simply preserving and interpreting sites like forts to a broader focus on reconstructing lifeways, supplementing and challenging history, improving methods, and understanding modernization and globalization. Little traces the shifting theoretical focus of the discipline, which began to more consciously address the histories of subaltern groups as the field matured and was influenced by cultural transformations like the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

The second section then dives into the theoretical stance, methods, and primary research directions that have captured the imagination of the discipline in recent decades. Little emphasizes the reflexive awareness that has transformed historical archaeology in a manner parallel to that undergone by cultural anthropology. Instead of viewing all cultures through the lens of Western truth and logical positivism, the discipline has embarked on a path that challenges dominant interpretations, gives voice to the disenfranchised and less powerful, and dares to look at "the ugly parts of our history, such as racism, homophobia, and domestic violence." She devotes particular attention to the discipline's strong focus on social relations between subaltern groups and elites, an area where archaeology can clearly supplement

and challenge history. Within that context, historical archaeologists have come to recognize that the presence of similar materials does not necessarily imply similar ways of thinking. Hence, the critical importance of context for understanding differences in meaning and artifact use among groups.

The third section offers what Little terms a “windshield survey” of historical archaeology—a look at some concrete examples that illustrate the themes introduced earlier in the book. Here, she considers the survival of the Jamestown colony, Mission San Luis de Talimali near Tallahassee, enclosures in medieval England, life in Annapolis, convicts in Australia, African-American experiences, industrialization at Harpers Ferry, working class experiences in West Oakland, and studies of modern garbage in Tucson.

The book concludes with a section that explores a number of ways historical archaeologists are embracing public archaeology as an opportunity to do more than just share knowledge. In addition to educating the public, Little considers the efforts some practitioners are making to engage disenfranchised groups and descendant

communities in the conduct and outcomes of historical archaeology. Here the book returns full circle to the issue of social relevance. Instead of writing archaeologies about people, Little discusses how some practitioners are writing them *with* descendant communities. That collaborative approach can—in Little’s words—“stimulate and empower local community members, visitors, and scholars to make historically informed judgments about heritage and the ways that we use it in the present.” This is good food for thought. It demonstrates the transformative power of a fully engaged archaeology as a tool of civic engagement, with lessons for the dilemmas we face in the present moment.

## REFERENCES

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## *The Archaeological Survey Manual*

Gregory G. White and Thomas F. King  
Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press Inc., 2007, 188 pp.,  
extensively illustrated, bibliography, 4 appendices, index,  
\$29.95 (paperback), \$69.00 (hardback).

### Reviewed by Terry L. Jones

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Anyone who has ever taught an archaeological field class knows how difficult it can be to develop a list of readings to complement the field exercises. Field classes, of course, represent the ultimate in hands-on learning. Students

take field classes to learn the actual experience of living in the field, discovering archaeological sites and artifacts, and recording them; reading about these activities is a far cry from actually engaging in them, and no one really likes to read about field methods when they’re actually in the field. In addition, there can often be a plethora of more important things to do after the end of a day in the field than read about methods. Nonetheless, no educational experience can ever be considered complete or adequate unless the hands-on lessons are accompanied by reading assignments. Greg White, Tom King, and Left Coast Press have done the discipline a tremendous service by developing a manual for archaeological field survey that will serve as a perfect reader for any field