

AVOCATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND THE DESIGNATION OF A WORLD HERITAGE SITE

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This past spring, I participated in a forum about professional archaeologists working with amateur or avocational archaeologists. The session, “Cons or Pros: Should Archaeologists Collaborate with Responsible Collectors?” was organized by Michael Shott and Bonnie Pitblado at the Society for American Archaeology Annual Meeting held in San Francisco. In their introductory comments, both organizers emphasized the need for a cordial and respectful discussion, perhaps anticipating a polarized response to the question they posed. I have a long-standing concern with the dismissive view taken by many professionals in our discipline of *all* amateur or avocational archaeologists, whether they collect artifacts or not. During a graduate school lecture I listened to a professor state, “There is no such thing as an amateur archaeologist. Would you go to an amateur brain surgeon?” At that time, my response was something like “You have got to be kidding. Give me a break!”

Over the past 50 years, as our discipline has become more professionalized with degreed practitioners from higher-education institutions, the separation between the avocational and professional archaeologist has increased. The sentiment of my graduate school professor is not uncommon in our discipline. Today, the role of the avocational archaeologist is viewed not as *different from* but as decidedly *less than* that of the professional.

In this essay, I review the contributions of a few seminal avocational archaeologists at the Poverty Point earthworks (16WC1) in northeast Louisiana. I show how that role has decreased over the past 50 years. I also demonstrate how the work of avocational archaeologists proved critical in the recent UNESCO World Heritage designation of the site. I argue that without greater public engagement, including engagement with avocational archaeologists, our discipline will have a decreased value to the public that pays our salaries. I do not take a “holier than thou” position on this issue. I acknowledge my hesitancy to commit time and

resources to substantive avocational engagement during my tenure as the Station Archaeologist at the Poverty Point site and elsewhere. I use the term “avocational” to mean someone without professional training who makes their living by other means but expends a good bit of time, energy, and research on archaeology as a second unpaid career or heavily invests in it as a hobby. Some avocational archaeologists collect or have collected artifacts, others do not. *All* are critical to the advancement of the field of archaeology.

The Modern Discovery of the Poverty Point Site

Like most prehistoric monumental architecture recorded in the modern era, Poverty Point (Figure 1) was discovered by explorers, adventurers, and antiquarians. One of the earliest written accounts describing the site is by Samuel Lockett in the 1870s, although an earlier unpublished autobiography of Jacob Walters describes his visit to the area around 1840 (Connolly 1997). The first detailed map of the earthen mounds at Poverty Point was made by C. B. Moore (1913) based on investigations conducted during the winter of 1912–1913. Moore was also the first to provide detailed descriptions and illustrations of cultural materials recovered from the site.

Clarence Webb and Carl Alexander, Surface Collectors Extraordinaire

Clarence Webb, a pediatrician and avocational archaeologist from Shreveport, Louisiana, is arguably the best link and source of continuity between the 1950s Poverty Point culture investigations of James Ford and those initiated by Jon Gibson in the 1970s and continued by others to this day. His initial contact with Ford was in 1936 at the Belcher Mounds that Webb was investigating (Gibson 1992:11).

By the 1970s, Webb, with apparently a good bit of free time from his career as a pediatrician, had typed over 100,000 arti-

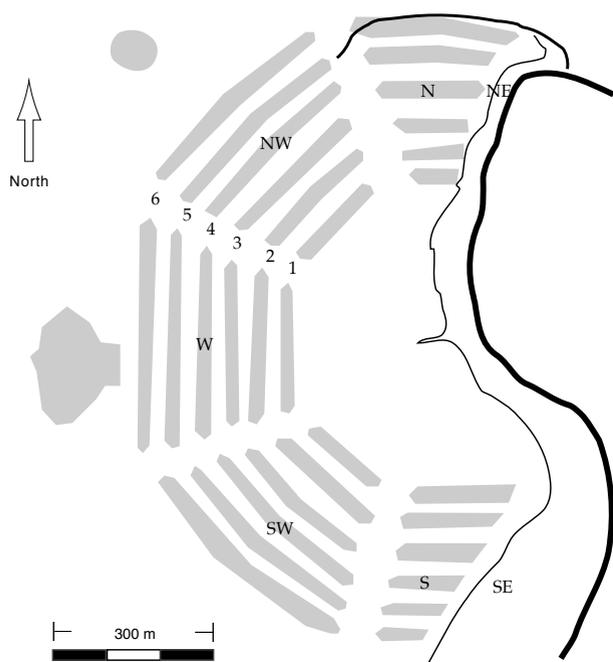


Figure 1. Ridge and sector system recorded on surface-collected artifacts.

facts from 40 Poverty Point culture sites (Gibson 1992:14). Webb's work resulted in a co-authored two-volume work on artifact typology: *Poverty Point Culture and the American Formative* (Webb et al. 1970, 1971).

In the 1960s, Carl Alexander began to conduct surface collections across the Poverty Point earthwork ridges. Alexander had a relationship with the farmers in the area, which allowed him free reign to collect across the 400 acres of the earthen ridges. Conventional wisdom has it that either Webb or Ford convinced Alexander to record the provenience of his collected artifacts. He therefore devised a system to identify the provenience of each artifact by one of the six ridges and five sectors (Figure 2), along with another 75 or so locations of high artifact densities within or outside the C-form of earthwork architecture.

By 1968, Alexander began dividing up his collection and distributing it to academic institutions, including the University of Florida and Louisiana State University. He retained a small portion of the collection. I don't know the details of how his collection was divided into multiple components, but I assume that there was some exchange of money. I



Figure 2. Artifact with ridge and sector provenience recorded: R₃/NE is Ridge 3, Northeast Sector.

would not doubt that Alexander also sold other portions of his collection over time.

What is beyond dispute is that, by the early 1970s, Alexander's surface collection became the primary basis for interpreting the socioeconomic organization of the prehistoric occupation at Poverty Point. Ford and Webb had planned a new publication on Poverty Point based largely on the strength of Alexander's surface collection. Ford's illness and death precluded launching that project. Webb (1982) ultimately completed the project on his own by publishing *The Poverty Point Culture*, perhaps the most often-cited publication on the culture's artifact types and their distributions through space and time.

Jon Gibson (1973) based his dissertation solely on data he generated from Alexander and Webb's collections. Today, all of the Alexander surface collections have been returned to the Poverty Point site curation facility in Epps, Louisiana. That surface collection contains in excess of 100,000 whole artifacts provenienced to a specific location at the Poverty Point earthwork complex. As these materials continue to be typed and inventoried, the number of provenienced, surface-collected artifacts will increase. The collections provide an unparalleled opportunity to further the understanding of the socioeconomic organization of the prehistoric occupation of the Poverty Point earthworks (e.g., Connolly 2012).

The avocational archaeology of both Webb and Alexander, including the collecting and meticulous documentation of artifact provenience, served as the basis for research designs

for investigations at Poverty Point. Further, the interpretative significance on which Poverty Point was successfully argued to merit a UNESCO World Heritage Site designation would have been dramatically weakened without the surface-collected material of Carl Alexander. Of note, no other archaeologist, professional or avocational, conducted the type of extensive surface collections as did Alexander when the site was in row crop. Such a method is not feasible today from both logistical and preservation perspectives.

Amateur Archaeology at the Jaketown Site

In the late 1990s, during my tenure as the Station Archaeologist at the Poverty Point site, I gave several presentations at the public library in Belzoni, Mississippi, just down the road from the Poverty Point culture Jaketown site (22Hu505). The presentations were attended by collectors from the area, many of whom brought their artifacts to the meeting for identification. In my first presentation, I spoke about the spatial distribution of artifact types noted by Webb and Alexander at Poverty Point. I asked the collectors in attendance whether they had noted similar patterns in the different types of artifacts recovered at Jaketown. Heads nodded. The second time I spoke in Belzoni, the same collectors talked about the artifact distributions they had noted during my previous presentation. Today, there is a small museum in Belzoni composed of collections donated by many of those collectors. My Belzoni experience is an example of avocational archaeologists (Webb and Alexander) training other avocational archaeologists, with the professional as an intermediary, a phenomenon also noted by avocational Jim Cox in his essay in this issue of *The SAA Archaeological Record*.

The Claiborne Site and Jerry Pankow

I first met Jerry Pankow in the early 2000s. He had come to the Poverty Point site to discuss his “amateur” archaeology excavations at the Poverty Point culture Claiborne site in Hancock County Mississippi. In the 1960s, Jerry and members of the Mississippi Archaeological Association diligently conducted excavations at this major Poverty Point culture site in advance of bulldozers that destroyed the site in a construction project. Jerry showed me his detailed field notes of 5-x-5-ft. units excavated through midden deposits at the Claiborne site. He recorded cultural materials in arbitrary 5-inch levels, providing an excellent stratigraphic profile on stylistic and material culture change through time—a point of critical interpretive importance for the Poverty Point culture. The temporal markers were also documented by Clarence Webb.

When I first met Jerry, he had just self-published a 35-page photocopied pamphlet on his excavations at the Claiborne site. While preparing my comments for the 2015 SAA forum, I discovered that, in 2014, Jerry had expanded the original publication to double the length, again self-published but now also available online. I got a copy and am impressed.

Discussion

My experiences with avocational archaeologists at the Poverty Point site demonstrate several points. The contributions of avocational archaeologists are a critically important part of the total corpus of knowledge that exists about that prehistoric culture today. Those contributions demonstrate that, without question, our understanding of the socioeconomic organization of the culture and site would be *greatly* reduced were it not for these avocational contributions.

The contributions of avocational archaeologists at Poverty Point are considerable and varied. Although Clarence Webb had no formal archaeological training, because of his educational background in medicine and his considerable publication record in peer-reviewed and other journals, I suspect that the inclination is to treat him as somehow different or better than Carl Alexander, who retired from the U.S. Navy and, to my knowledge, published nothing. Yet Ford and Webb were prepared to completely rewrite their 1956 type site report based on Alexander’s surface collections.

A clear trend through time has been to dismiss rather than engage the avocational community in research projects. That community is often considered from the perspective of a deficit model (Merriman 2004:6–11), in which the professional archaeologist is charged with the proper education of the public. Today, Clarence Webb or Carl Alexander probably would not be able to make their way onto an archaeological site, regardless of the experiential credentials they might bring. Their activities would be limited to volunteer projects of artifact inventory, screening sediments, or participating in a field school. Their expressed interests in archaeology would not be developed, except through their enrollment in a degree program at a local university.

However, concerns over the looting of archaeological resources, the commodification of this country’s cultural heritage, and a lack of public funding for archaeological research are all concerns expressed by the professional community. We are well-served to embrace the avocational community who have a proven track record and can develop the grassroots support to address these issues. Such engage-

ment is time consuming, produces uneven results, and is certainly not a linear exercise. Infrastructure and funding are not currently in place for such activities. A commitment is required to advocate for such projects by both the professional and avocational archaeological communities.

As Shott and Pitblado noted in their introduction to this essay series, a kernel of this commitment is found in the SAA's *Principles of Archaeological Ethics* (1996). Principle No. 4, Public Education and Outreach, states: "Archaeologists should reach out to, and participate in cooperative efforts with others interested in the archaeological record with the aim of improving the preservation, protection, and interpretation of the record." However, we need to recognize that it is not just a matter of *should*; rather, archaeologists *must* initiate such projects if we wish to have the support of the public.

In 1986, my first field school instructor, the late Dr. Patricia Essenpreis, said, "If you cannot explain to the public why they should be funding this site museum and excavations, then you might as well go home." Pat's comment flowed from her belief in the need for accountability in research on public lands and in recognition that almost all archaeology, whether through CRM, private foundation, or outright public financing, is ultimately funded through tax dollars.

Conclusion

We are well-served to reflect that our professional organization is named the Society for American Archaeology, not the Society for American Archaeologists. In noting this distinction, we are reminded that the interests of the discipline are appropriately placed before the self-interest of the practitioners. In the Poverty Point case studies I presented in this essay, the interests of the discipline were well-served by the engagement and support of the avocational archaeologists and their expressed interests.

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