

# Why is Archaeology Important?

## Global Perspectives, Local Concerns

by Charlotte A. Smith and Jennifer Freer Harris

Archaeology plays a real and vital role in today's world, although its valuable lessons and benefits can seem removed from everyday life. This article examines how understanding and conserving archaeological resources enhances the present *and* the future. This discussion of the importance of archaeology and archaeological resources pairs well with the previous article, which outlines the complexities of archaeological research. We have, however, separated the two topics to better highlight both of them. We hope this article imparts an awareness of the importance and fragility of Georgia's archaeological resources.

### Understanding Archaeology's Importance

The preceding article describes goals of archaeology. It concludes that archaeologists seek to understand human behavior from the micro (e.g., making a stone tool) to the macro (e.g., the spice trade between Europe and Asia). In this paper, we ask why and how the study of the past has relevance for today's society. Also, we identify the contributions archaeology makes to modern life and to other academic disciplines.

The most extensive programs that unite archaeology and the modern world are so-called public archaeology projects. Public funds support archaeological investigations in the early stages of projects involving federal funds, licensing, permits, or lands. For instance, when the US Forest Service lets a logging contract, archaeologists visit the property first to ascertain what sites are there and how significant they are. Archaeologists evaluate

the sites with a set of specific criteria laid out by law. If they determine a site is significant, it is either excavated to recover the information it contains, or it is avoided and protected. This is called cultural resource management, or CRM, archaeology. CRM projects produce most of the new archaeological information recorded in Georgia, and have for years, but the lands examined by CRM projects are only a small part of the state (Williams 2000).

CRM exists because legislators and their constituents—the public and its representatives—thought archaeological preservation important enough to include in US laws, and in governmental budgets. Thus, the public has already realized the relevance of archaeology and archaeological data to people living in today's world and preparing for tomorrow's world. In this paper, we try to make a strong case for the unique and important ways archaeological knowledge contributes to and enhances our lives, on a scale ranging from the individual to the community, and to our nation.

### The Intellectual Importance of Archaeology

If archaeologists are asked why their work is important, they are most likely to respond that it is for the same reasons history is valued. By knowing our human past, we appreciate who we are and where we came from. Accordingly, by studying the past, all of us can use this knowledge to inform our decisions about the future. Reassuringly, there are signs that the public shares that perspective about archaeology, too.

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A recent poll commissioned by the Society for American Archaeology (Ramos and Duganne 2000) asked members of the general public why they thought archaeology was important. Overwhelmingly, they responded that understanding the modern world was the foremost benefit and that we learn about the past in order to improve the future. They also suggest that the field contributes significantly to international affairs and in shaping modern values. That is evidence of substantially more insight into the field than archaeologists had believed existed.

Archaeologists also see intrinsic aesthetic, cultural, and spiritual reasons for humans' interest in their past. Curiosity, too, plays a role; it is a characteristic that is particularly human and responsible for many of our greatest achievements. Although they often downplay the mystery or romance of excavation and discovery of the past for fear that it may send the wrong message about their goals, archaeologists appreciate that the captivating allure of knowing ourselves and our place in the world is the root of all learning.

Archaeology transcends the limitations of written records, and can reveal detailed stories when no documents exist. The focus of history in America has traditionally been on great civilizations, great individuals, and events relevant to Western civilization. Archaeology not only speaks of that elite few who lived dramatic lives and perhaps were interred in rich burials, but also tells the stories of ordinary people and their daily exploits. Archaeological examination calls for both a sensi-

tivity to great detail—seeing evidence left in mere centimeters of stratified deposits in soil—combined with a simultaneous ability to zoom far back in space and time to discern broad patterns of human behavior. Archaeology is, in short, a discipline that reveals truths by observing and exploring evidence in ways others overlook. Unlike written history, which is often tied to national boundaries or particular groups and may carry inherent biases, archaeology is truly a universal field, spanning the experience of all humans.

### Archaeology in Education

Archaeology's potential for fostering more intelligent, involved, global citizens is considerable. In classrooms, learning about archaeology helps students develop various skills across many disciplines, including critical thinking. Archaeology can be readily included in a comprehensive curriculum for social science, history, mathematics, environmental studies, and art. Archaeology touches on the entire spectrum of human behavior and so inspires a never-ending series of questions. Students learn to appreciate history from different frames of reference, developing a sensitivity to other people and diverse cultures. Archaeological findings provide a framework for questions about statistics, economics, politics, cultural geography, ecology, agricultural practices, and food procurement, to name just a few. What other discipline can pull together those far-reaching lessons and also teach practical applications for a global positioning system, the Cartesian coordinate system,

#### Archaeology and the Education of Global Citizens

In recent years, global education has become a standard element in many primary and secondary school programs. Archaeology is a vital piece of that curriculum. Phyllis Messenger and Walter Enloe (1991:161–162) discuss specific ways archaeologists can bring the world, past and present, into the classroom, using the breadth and depth that archaeology can provide.

Archaeology permits intensive study of a single culture over time, removing the myth of an unchanging traditional past. By understanding the goals of archaeological research, students discover that their actions can influence the future, and impact both environment and society. By removing the exotic quality of another culture, and by emphasizing our human similarities and explaining our differences, teachers can instill in students a respect for other cultures and their products.

The breadth and nature of archaeological inquiry helps teachers move from lectures to hands-on learning. Archaeologists use a wide-set of resources—museums, local sites, universities, and archaeological societies—that then become available to the student. Making the most of a student's natural interest and motivation, using archaeology in the classroom can offer students opportunities for participating in positive action on the world around them (e.g., adopt-a-site stewardship programs). Finally, by understanding and appreciating the world they live in through study of the past and present, students become better-informed global citizens.

and ground penetrating radar?

Archaeological information is brought to the public through museums, interpretive sites, and cultural reconstruction. These forums provide an opportunity to reflect on the diversity of the human experience in an engaging and informative way. They convey a sense of everyday life in the past, allowing visitors to connect it to themselves and making it accessible to everyone. These forums also encourage general participation in interpreting the past and safeguarding the archaeological record. Those various forums allow professionals to translate the technical results of archaeological investigation into the popular vernacular. That communication, in turn, is a crucial link in the process of continuing archaeological research and preservation.

One of archaeology's greatest strengths lies in its ability to give voice to those who are left out and left behind in many other fields of study. The "excluded past" (Stone and Mackenzie 1990), that of minority or indigenous groups that have a scanty or absent written history, is one that is poorly understood by many of us. Only a society that examines *all* of its past can truly appreciate the powerful blend of traditions and lifeways that it carries into the present and future.

### Archaeology and Your Community

Archaeology—and its role in modern society—is more connected to your daily life than you might imagine. For example, consider the important issues in the decisions you made to choose where you live? Personal safety, distance to work, quality of schools, nearby green space and natural areas, neighborhood aesthetic quality, and community cohesiveness may have been among the decisive factors. Archaeology can reinforce those factors, or can be a tangible component in their local implementation. For instance, archaeology dovetails well with neighborhood revitalization projects, and contributes substantially to research about historic districts. Indeed, how can archaeology strengthen your local economy or support efforts at reducing sprawl in your neighborhood?

#### **The Economics of Our Past**

Any landowner, including individuals, corporations, and large land-holding institutions may own and control archaeological resources. Yet, in many

### Historic Preservation Successes

When communities take an active interest in their past the results can be both exceptional and exciting. In Crawfordville, Georgia students from a University of Georgia historic preservation class, gaining valuable fieldwork and research experience, conducted an inventory of the historic homes and buildings (Moore and Brooks, 1996). They compiled information on date of construction, architectural design and building materials for each structure. The students presented the completed inventory to the local leaders and submitted it to the local library for future preservation and planning efforts. If other cities and towns across Georgia take similar stock of their archaeological resources they will better position themselves for intelligent planning and control over their heritage.

How else has Crawfordville made the most of its past? It has been the setting for eight movies and more than twenty television shows. Today the community continues to work on preserving and restoring downtown storefronts in the hopes of bringing more filmmakers to town.

cases they may not have any idea that that such resources are part of their real estate holdings. At the same time, many archaeologists find it very challenging to initiate dialogues with such landowners, and to suggest they may control important resources. This is a complex issue; nevertheless, some land-holders have found it rewarding to consider the role archaeological research and preservation of the past can have in enhancing community life, and in enhancing their public image.

Indeed, archaeological resource conservation and economic development are not always at odds with one another. They can become successful partners with a modest blend of foresight, guidance, and planning.

A precedent for this perspective on archaeology has been set by the many successful historic preservation programs implemented in Georgia. Historic preservation is a crucial component of community revitalization projects and the planning and development process; it is especially effective in enhancing the period character of a community. Archaeology contributes to historic preservation projects by amplifying existing records especially through carefully-planned excavations in the neighborhood.

Historic districts, often preserved through myriad efforts including neighborhood interpretive programs, historic preservation endeavors, individual donors, and the clout of National Register of Historic Places status, can mean substantial revenue for local communities. A recent report from the Georgia State Historic Preservation Office (Leithe and Tigue 1999) outlines several means through which prehistoric and historic resources bring dollars into a community

- preservation creates jobs through restoration and interpretive projects;
- preservation enhances property values in historic districts;
- preservation revitalizes once stagnant communities;
- heritage sites are becoming increasingly popular with tourist destinations;
- heritage tourists spend more money and stay longer at destinations than the average traveler in the US.

These figures do not include the largest portion of dollars flowing in from the historic preservation movement through rehabilitation of homes, churches, and community centers, or local revitalization projects. Those projects impact residents at home, in their neighborhood, and in their coun-

ty—economically and culturally. In 1996 alone, historic preservation projects brought Georgia (Leithe and Tigue 1999:13)

- 7550 jobs in the construction industry and in other sectors of the Georgia economy;
- \$201 million in earnings, including wages for workers and profits for local businesses;
- \$559 million in total economic activity.

Tax incentives for income-producing rehabilitation projects, such as apartments and office space, contribute to the booming heritage economy as well. From 1992 to 1996 over \$85 million were funneled into Georgia's economy in tax credits given to approved historic preservation projects.

There are other avenues for economic benefits as well. Considering that people are now spending more on heritage tourism than on general tourism and entertainment (movies, dinners, cultural events), the market potential for heritage activities is staggering. The opportunities for growth and investment in heritage, individually and communally, have never been better.

Also, when corporations invest in local archaeological resources, or act as responsible stewards for those holdings under their authority, they gain a valuable public relations benefit. Several years ago, when the Cobb County Country Club sought to

### **Partners for the Past: Archaeological Preservation and Other Conservation Organizations**

Environmental advocates have heightened public awareness of the precious nature of our non-renewable resources, which include archaeological sites, information, and resources. Accordingly, Americans have increasingly put their dollars toward businesses that act conscientiously, with an eye toward future generations. It is not cynicism to suggest that those interested in preserving archaeological resources must make the most of that sentiment, and urge communities and organizations to act quickly to save our heritage. One way to accomplish that goal is to integrate archaeological site preservation into natural resource conservation programs, many of which already provide outstanding models for accomplishing these goals, and therefore have gained wide popular support.

The Georgia Natural Heritage Program is one such example. Created by the Department of Natural Resources and The Nature Conservancy in 1986, it is part of the national Natural Heritage Network. To preserve Georgia's natural diversity—plants, animals, biological networks—the program identifies endangered areas, inventories species and habitats through field survey, and provides an easily accessible catalog of data (maps, computer data banks, manual files) for planners, researchers, educators, and the general public. The Natural Heritage Program encourages stewardship of resources on private land by offering concise guidelines and incentives (technical assistance, tax incentives, recognition programs and other habitat conservation aid) for individuals willing to participate.

Endangered archaeological resources are protected if other conservation programs are aware that when they manage wild or undeveloped lands, those lands probably also shelter archaeological resources. If groups interested in protecting archaeological resources could effectively partner with other conservation groups, stewardship information would be extended to individuals already seeking to protect our natural resources.

For more information about the Georgia Natural Heritage program, contact the Wildlife Resources Division of the Georgia DNR (<http://www.dnr.state.ga.us/dnr/wild/natural.html>).

develop a new golf course and housing development, they incorporated many archaeological features into their design, thereby protecting them. Those features included Civil War-era trenches and rifle pits. At the same time, they included some of the artifacts recovered by archaeologists into a public museum in the club house.

This discussion, hopefully, is a catalyst for innovative thinking about archaeological resource conservation. The misconception of historic properties and prehistoric sites as large item expenditures, instead of revenue generators, can be adjusted. A preservation program for our past should not just be about old buildings—it can be expanded to include how all people lived on the land throughout prehistory and history.

### **Environmental Lessons**

It is important to note that financial payoffs are not the only benefits for those investing in the past. In addition to the economic value, there is a substantial cultural and environmental advantage to effective archaeological stewardship. When lands with archaeological sites are set aside from development, green spaces are created and some effects of sprawl are alleviated. Community improvements like riverwalks, bikepaths, and streetscaping often accompany preservation projects. Deteriorating neighborhoods are given new life and their original character may be restored. Protected communities minimize the negative effects of development by not having to create costly new infrastructures or expand existing ones (e.g., roadways, sewer, and utility systems). Finally, pride in ownership and local identity increases substantially in historic districts, creating better environments, physically and culturally, for families and businesses. It is encouraging that the consequences of modern human environmental interaction need not all be negative, destructive, and degrading.

The long lesson of our human past provides models for judicious use of local environments and real-life cautionary tales of over-exploitation of finite resources. Archaeological studies can sharpen an understanding of the successes and failures of human decisions throughout our long existence. We would be wise to take advantage of that hard-earned knowledge, accumulated over generations, when we consider our own future.

### **Evaluating the Fish in Our Waterways: The Zooarchaeology Connection**

Byron J. Freeman, an ecologist at the University of Georgia, consults zooarchaeological reports to determine what species inhabited waterways long before written records exist. Such information is crucial in arguing for or against the reintroduction of species into river systems where they no longer reside.

Zooarchaeologists analyze the sometimes tiny skeletal remains of fish, birds, and other animals recovered from archaeological contexts, looking for not only the existence of certain species, but also at how humans used them in the past. Thus, zooarchaeological reports provide detailed species lists from historic and prehistoric periods long gone, and ecologists like Freeman can use them to track the disappearance of various species of fish, birds, and other creatures.

### **Resources for Other Academic Fields**

Archaeology is integral to research in other scientific fields, and in particular, adds temporal depth to those investigations. For example, archaeological survey and excavation produce data that aid historians in understanding unrecorded details of life. What was life really like on a coastal rice plantation or for piedmont subsistence farmers in the mid-1800s? What did De Soto and his men see as they traversed the Southeast over four years in the early 1500s?

Other types of general information that archaeologists provide include:

- the various means of making a living (especially subsistence and daily life) that humans have practiced throughout the past and the conditions necessary for their success;
- the range and types of human social and political organization that existed around the globe and at different periods of time;
- comparisons of modern and ancient adaptations to physical or cultural stimuli;
- insightful theoretical models on such diverse topics as warfare and conflict resolution, economic development, the rise of agriculture, and the development of modern nation-states.

Archaeologists also provide specific information useful to other specialists. Examples of how archaeological data are used by specialists in myriad fields include:

### Descendant Communities and Georgia's Archaeological Resources

None of us can forget that what archaeologists call archaeological sites were created by people whose descendants live on today. Thanks to the unjust Removal policy of the US government, Georgia's aboriginal inhabitants were forced from their lands during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. As a result, large Native American populations are not found in Georgia today. Native American interest in Georgia's past, however, remains substantial.

Archaeologists use material remains to reconstruct ways of living that existed in the past. Often, although not in all cases, archaeologists treat those past cultures as if they have no living descendants. Native Southeastern cultures thrive today, and to many of those people, their past lives on in their culture. For example, Wickman notes that for Southeastern Indians,

*the symbolic power of the chiefdom...in the forms of social status, political precedence, and social weight within oral traditions, persisted into the nineteenth century, and in certain ways, to the present.* (1999:39)

While the interests of archaeologists and Native Americans have often been at odds in the past, both constituencies share a common goal—to preserve the remains of the past. Indeed, many members of both groups now realize that

*[w]hen data and archives on human history are lost, there is a loss to science and to the descendants/scientists/owners/curators of those archives.* (Swedlund and Anderson 1999:574)

- *Epidemiologists* examine data for evidence of disease patterns, which help them understand the history of epidemics (e.g., the spread of Old World diseases among non-resistant peoples in the New World).

- *Linguists* use remarkable techniques to reconstruct language and population emigrations. When linguistic clues are combined with archaeological data, researchers can better understand the ways culture is shaped by language, and vice versa.

- *Ecologists* and *geographers* look to archaeology for evidence of environmental practices not recorded by history. For instance, archaeological evidence of sedimentation, when dated securely, helps show when forests were cut and erosion increased.

- *Site interpreters* extensively use archaeological data to report accurately the details of the past.

- *Exhibit designers* and *museum curators* use archaeological research for educational programs and interpretive displays.

- *Re-enactors* closely study archaeological reports and historical documents to more accurately reenact events from the past such as Civil War battles.

- *Forensic studies* use archaeological techniques to reconstruct the events surrounding the death and burial of exhumed individuals. Recently, the Society for Historical Archaeology devoted an entire issue to archaeology and forensics (Connor and Scott 2001).

The rich and varied contributions that the archaeological record can yield are limited only by the questions asked of it. The unanswered questions of experts in other fields can be the catalyst for archaeologists to conduct new types of research, to create new techniques for coaxing information from material remains, and to develop new ways of looking at past behavior.

### Archaeology is More than Our Past, It's Our Future

In this paper we have highlighted linkages, some seldom considered, between archaeological knowledge and the modern world. Clearly we all benefit from archaeological research for purely educational and scientific reasons, but the work also produces significant insights into the problems that we all face today. More importantly, it provides for the practical applications to solve them, as when archaeology examines the broad patterns of human adaptation to massive global climatic change, or when it spotlights smaller, individual community responses to local environmental shifts. An archaeological perspective is vitally important to achieving a greater understanding of how human occupation, resource consumption, and other choices about how we live affects us where we live—in nature, in our environment.

We hope you received, and will seriously contemplate, two messages from this essay. First, from economic development to understanding many cultures to helping children improve their critical thinking skills, the study of archaeology contributes substantially to everyday lives. Second, in order to use archaeology as a tool, to take full

advantage of the information that material remains embody—we must ensure that those fragile resources are protected and preserved with far more diligence than we do now.

Before that can happen, people need to comprehend the full value of archaeological research. Knowing why archaeology is important will guarantee that more of the archaeological record is available when we discover new ways to put our knowledge of human behavior to use. When archaeologists work with a community to preserve, research and interpret its past, they create a partnership that will ensure a better understanding of not only their past, but of their future.

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