

Alabama Archaeology Month 2020

Interviewing Women in Archaeology



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DR. ASHLEY DUMAS

Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of West Alabama

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Saluting Women in Archaeology



Dr. Ashley Dumas **Associate Professor of Anthropology** **at the University of West Alabama**

1) What is your educational background?

BA in Anthropology and French from USA; MA and PhD from UA

2) What are your primary research interests?

I have excavated and analyzed primarily later prehistoric and historic sites in the Southeast.

3) What motivated you to become an archaeologist or how did you become an archaeologist?

I've always been drawn to "what was," whether looking for old home sites and abandoned roads, gravestones grown-over, or the broken and lost. The idea that thousands of people just like us were once here, living, thinking, hoping, and are now gone is a bit morbid, I suppose, but also incredibly humbling and unifying. While we have a lot in common with past peoples, we also know that material culture, values, perspectives, and even our self-perception changes over time, so I'm interested in how culture shapes historical fact and narrative. It didn't occur to me until I was in college that I could study that through archaeology, which I thought was only to be found in the glossy photos of *National Geographic* and coffee table books.

4) What is the most interesting archaeological site on which you've worked?

Difficult question! I suppose the most "exotic" project was working on an early 17-th century farmhouse on the Île aux Oies, Québec. Fort Tombeché, Sumter County, is pretty special, because there is evidence of hardship and also alliance with native peoples. I also love working on salt production sites. The ones in south Alabama are clearly special purpose sites that were focused on the extraction of salt from brine, which involved the use of specialized pottery. The sites are deep and date from around 1,000 years ago to the mid-19th century. People will go to great lengths to obtain whatever they consider to be valuable.

5) Who was your most influential mentor? How did they influence your work?

There are several people from whom I've learned, and continue to learn, to help me to be a better archaeologist and teacher. Greg Waselkov was my undergraduate advisor, but undergraduates never listen, so I've learned the most from Greg in recent years while we've worked together on various projects. He's taught me that I'm capable of more than I think I am. At USA's Center for Archaeological Studies, I learned how to get after a project from Bonnie Gums and George Shorter; I've never worked so hard in the field. In grad school at UA, Ian Brown was my caring thesis and dissertation advisor. Two practical takeaways from Ian are to choose your battles wisely and that every project, no matter how big, all comes down to a day's work. Just put in the time, focused and steady, and it will get done. I have benefited enormously from the time that these people and many others have given me, and I try to do the same with each of my students. The thing about scholarship and personal growth, though, is that it's never done, so I take lessons from the past but am always looking to learn from new people. In the last few years, for instance, I have become better acquainted with Heather McKillop, an archaeologist at LSU and also a salt scholar. I didn't know how much I needed the guidance and cheer-leading of another female scholar until I met Heather. She has a gregarious, encouraging attitude that tends to dispel a lot of self-doubt.

6) Do you work with volunteers? If so, how do interested people become volunteers?

I love to work with volunteers! Archaeology is a team sport, so as long as it's practical, I love to have volunteers at Fort Tombeché and, occasionally, at the salt works in south Alabama. In fact, I rely on volunteers for a lot of fieldwork, lab work, access to property, and morale—they are my friends. Walter, Maurie, David, April, Tom, I'm looking at you. I also enjoy *being* a volunteer, because I get to work some place I might not have worked and always learn from others.

7) What public archaeological site do you think best handles preservation and interpretation? Why?

Anna Mullican does a fantastic job at Oakville Mounds with regular public programming, seeking expert advice on collections, and building partnerships with a variety of stakeholders. She is a one-woman educator/public relations specialist/event organizer who has increased appreciation for site preservation in the north Alabama region.

8) What is your favorite thing about being an archaeologist?

Learning about cultures by piecing together little incomplete puzzles they leave behind, looking for patterns, is satisfying, and I love teaching others about it. From one broken, decorated potsherd, we can discuss one thousand year old family identities or regional prehistoric religious beliefs. With enough attention to detail and pattern, combined with conversations with indigenous peoples, we actually can begin to understand what past people believed and valued.

9) What is your least favorite thing about being an archaeologist?

My least favorite thing about being an archaeologist is being one in a culture that mostly values archaeology for its occasional entertainment value. Many people have said to me, “Oh, I always wanted to be an archaeologist!” The subtext is that then they matured and realized it wasn’t practical or relevant or well-paying or socially-approved or family-approved or [insert other reason here]. Archaeologists have to work on that relevant part. In the meantime, I don’t mind our work providing entertainment and casual education for anyone, as long as there are limits to how much one assumes I should consult for free. It’s true that, unlike surgeons or engineers, when an archaeologist makes a mistake, usually no one dies. But we have to hold ourselves to a higher standard, reminding ourselves and others that our mistakes can result in the irreplaceable loss of fragmentary, unique information. Doing it right is a valuable service to society that deserves respect.

10) Who do you most admire in our field and why?

In the field of archaeology, I admire most the archaeologist parents who undertake large research projects involving long hours for weeks at a time and who follow-through with public outreach and publications, all while tending to the needs of their families.

11) Do you have advice for people who want to pursue a career in archaeology?

Here’s my test, rather than advice, for those who might want to be an archaeologist: Do you read about it for fun every week? Are you passionate enough to be a patient advocate and educator to everyone who wants to know more about it?

12) How do you feel about the Hollywood and/or reality tv portrayal of archaeology?

I appreciate the publicity for archaeology generated by Hollywood films, even though it does lead to stereotypes and misunderstandings. These sorts of films trigger the same dopamine release that we all get from the thrill of discovery, whether it’s a golden monkey head or a broken stone tool. I can work with that initial, if misinformed, excitement as a doorway into instructing what archaeology is really about—a process and theory-based discipline that uses objects and places to reassemble past cultures.

13) What is your least favorite question that you are frequently asked by non-archaeologists and why?

My least favorite question from non-archaeologists is whether I, or “the state,” or “the government” will take away someone’s collection from private property or will take over their private land just because it has artifacts on it. If you’re reading this and aren’t sure, the answer is: No, we won’t!

14) What can the general public do to protect and preserve archaeological sites?

If people could simply write down where they find artifacts and share that information (not necessarily the artifacts themselves) with archaeologists, it would be a tremendous help for all of us to understand the where, when, and why people lived as they did. But archaeologists need to encourage this with more kindness. We have

to do a better job of being open and friendly to the public and our constituents: few developers are evil; few collectors are unethical; no one who thinks you dig dinosaurs is unworthy of being respected and taught. The public knows *a lot* about where sites and artifacts are, and we need their help. Working together, we have a lot to offer to the world for better understanding what it means to be human, but we won't get very far if humanity feels alienated by archaeologists.

15) What was the professional culture in archaeology like from a female perspective when you began your career?

When I started in archaeology in the mid-1990s, the generation of women archaeologists ahead of me had trail-blazed and normalized their presence in the lab and in the field. (I still love the book "*Grit-Tempered: Early Women Archaeologists in the Southeastern United States*" edited by White et al., University Press of Florida, 2001). However, until very recently, sexual harassment was understood to be just part of the environment, particularly at conferences. I think a lot of women internalized this, feeling they couldn't or wouldn't be accepted if they did not entertain or put up with the flirting, passes, and innuendo. Sadly, discrimination among women also was terrible; we can be our toughest critics and judges.

16) Do you think that your gender made it more difficult to become an archaeologist? If so, how?

As far as I know, my gender has not made it more difficult to become an archaeologist. I had mentors and teachers who made sure I was proficient at fieldwork as well as lab work. However, there are situations when women should probably take precautions for personal safety that men may not have to worry about. One time I went to visit a site by myself, and the landowner (a male) was very creepy and inappropriate. I shouldn't have gone by myself. Another time, a visitor to a site saw me and a female colleague working at a water screen. He made a few jokes about us being kept washing the dishes. Fortunately, it's been a long time since I've heard comments like that. I suppose that doing fieldwork while being pregnant is unique to women. It wasn't a problem for me except during the third trimester, which coincided with the time to backfill units. I let my students do most of that work.

17) What barriers or challenges unique to women did you encounter?

I'm stronger than I look, but I'm not above accepting help toting a full five-gallon bucket. And I'll accept that help from a man or a woman if it's offered with genuine interest in helping with the project. I admit to having some sentimental, if outmoded, understanding of some older men's culture-based inclination to take over the heavy lifting. It can be offered without patronizing, and it can be accepted graciously.

18) Does being a woman influence your interpretation of the archaeological sites that you excavate? If so, how?

I suppose I do tend to think about the daily lives of the women who may have been present at a site being excavated. At Fort Tombeché, for instance, Choctaw women were critical to the success of the fort. They grew the maize often consumed by the French marines, made the pots used in the fort, helped process valuable deer hides, among other essential activities. At salt-making sites, I've drawn from ethnographic evidence to hypothesize that women were responsible for the majority of salt production.

19) Are there ongoing stories or interpretations in archaeology that you think would be different if they had been interpreted by women?

Regarding prehistory, perhaps we would be further along with interpreting material culture according to the concepts of communities of practice and kin ties if twentieth-century archaeologists had more often used matrilineal organization as a framework for understanding the interactions, focus, and economics of everyday life.

20) Have you ever found something in the archaeological record that was specifically female? If so what? How did it make you feel?

Much of how we interpret sites and artifacts is based on ethnography, incomplete historic documents, and assumptions. Based on ethnohistoric accounts of Southeastern native women weaving textiles, we assume that women made all textiles. With that assumption in mind, I do look at impressions of textiles on pottery and picture women teaching one another techniques of making skirts, mantles, bags, sometimes rather plain and functional and sometimes intricately woven with immense skill. Maybe one day we'll find evidence that men were involved, too, which would just enrich the story.

