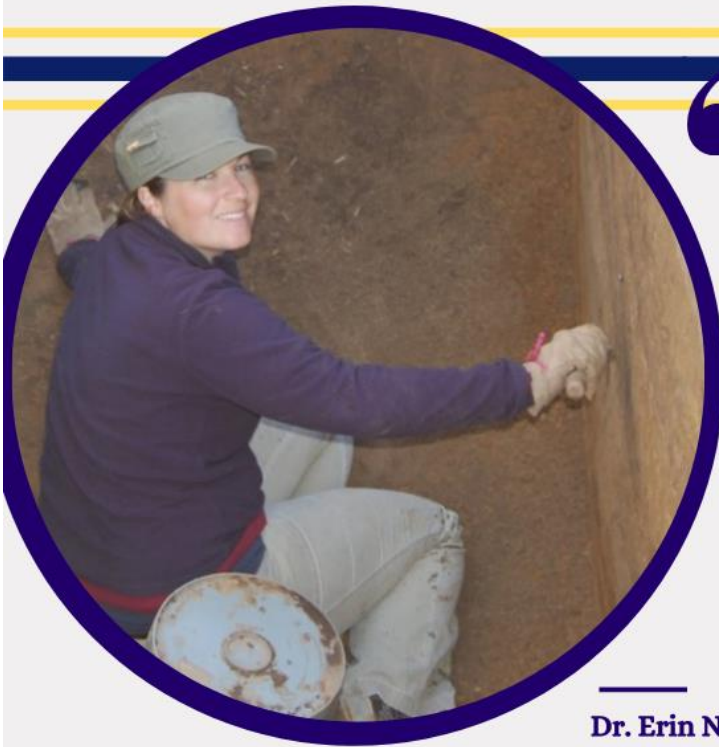


# Alabama Archaeology Month 2020

## *Interviewing Women in Archaeology*



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**Dr. Erin Nelson**

Associate Professor of Anthropology  
University of South Alabama

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## *Saluting Women in Archaeology*



**Dr. Erin Nelson**

**Associate Professor of Anthropology  
University of South Alabama**

**1) What is your educational background?**

PhD from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; MA from University of Mississippi, Oxford; BA from University of Missouri, Columbia

**2) What is your current job? Please describe.**

I'm an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at University of South Alabama, Mobile. As a professor, my job involves a combination of teaching, research, and writing. By far my favorite part about my job is introducing my

students to research in the field and in the lab and guiding them as they learn how archaeologists build interpretations of how people lived in the past.

**3) What are your primary research interests?**

I'm interested in the ways people in the past built community through everyday practices as well as special, non-everyday events. What people eat and drink, how they organize space, how they build and modify landscapes, and what they make and throw away says a lot about the kind of communities people live in, now and in the past.

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

It was totally accidental! I was casting about for a major during my sophomore year of college after deciding I didn't want to be a doctor after all. I enrolled in an anthropology course, which forever changed my perspective on what it means to be human. Among other things, it gave me a long-term historical perspective on being human I'd never gotten from another class. I signed up for a field school that summer and was immediately hooked - I loved working outside and I loved the intellectual challenge of trying to understand someone's way of life from the small bits of things they left behind.

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

That's a hard question to answer because every site is unique, and they all have something to say. I do find that the longer I work at a site, the more invested I become in telling the stories of the people who once lived there. In that sense, Parchman Place (in the Yazoo Basin of Mississippi) and Feltus (in the Natchez Bluffs; also, in Mississippi) are really interesting and important to me. Both sites are organized with earthen mounds arranged around a plaza, but the way people used them couldn't have been more different. Parchman Place was a Mississippian town where people lived and worked together year-round. Feltus was a place where Coles Creek people gathered at certain times of the year to eat and drink together, bury their dead, and practice religious ceremonies. The sites look so similar to one another that you'd never know how different their stories are without spending a lot of time doing archaeology! I have plans to begin work soon at two mound sites in lower Alabama - Bottle Creek and Dauphin Island - that are key for understanding Mississippian lifeways on the Gulf Coast and I can't wait to tell their stories as well.

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

Another really hard question because there have been so many. My undergrad advisor Ray Wood was the first person who took me aside and told me I was good at this and that I should think about pursuing it as a career. I don't know if everyone needs to hear that, but I did. Jay Johnson, my advisor at Ole Miss, taught me that you don't have to know everything (or anything) at the beginning, and that you can always learn how to do something new. That's a lesson I revisit every time I feel like I don't know how to approach a new problem. I learned a lot of valuable lessons from Vin Steponaitis and John O'Hear about how to run a field project. Vin also taught me how to break down a big project into small chunks and I continue to follow his advice to "make progress every day." He and Margie Scarry also influenced how I approach writing and presenting archaeological data. Margie is one of the best writers I know -- she's my "audience of one" most of the time when I'm writing. Many other folks have provided professional support in other ways, most recently, Greg Waselkov, another person whose writing I admire and whose many contributions to Alabama archaeology are an inspiration.

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

Absolutely. The Center for Archaeological Studies at the University of South Alabama works with a fantastic group of volunteers, mostly thanks to the hard work of Bonnie Gums! Volunteer fieldwork is on hiatus right now due to COVID, but anyone interested in volunteering in the future can contact me to be added to the volunteer list.

**8) What public archaeological site do you think best handles preservation and interpretation? why?**

There are too many excellent examples of this to choose just one. One thing I think is really important, however, is a trend toward descendant communities having a voice in how the past is interpreted and presented to the public. The recent focus of Monticello on the lives of people enslaved by Thomas Jefferson wouldn't have happened without the Black historic preservation professionals working to bring that history to the public. This goes beyond archaeology too. The Metropolitan Museum of Art just hired its first Native American curator - in 2020!

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

I really like the fact that every archaeological site presents a new and different challenge for interpretation. I once overheard a veteran archaeologist tell a field school student, "I've never seen the same thing twice," and it's true! And because every situation is different, everyone from students to volunteers to experienced archaeologists can contribute to understanding a site. Where the experienced person might try to fit what they see into their existing framework, a novice sees the same thing with fresh eyes, which may be just what is needed in order to understand it better. And archaeology is inherently social - it's great to be part of a team working toward a common goal in the field or the lab.

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

It is pretty challenging to balance archaeology (or any field-based job) with family life. I have young children, which makes long field seasons away from home impractical. Fortunately, archaeology is everywhere. My job allows me the flexibility to choose where I work, but many jobs in Cultural Resource Management require you to go where the work is. That's pretty tough if you have a family.

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

The people I admire most are the ones who stay positive in the face of all the inevitable obstacles that fieldwork presents. The people who are still making the crew laugh and pitching in to help at the end of a long day. Anna Semon, I'm looking at you.

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

Fieldwork, fieldwork, fieldwork. Get as much fieldwork as you can under your belt at as many different sites, in as many different time periods, and in as many different places as you can. Archaeology is destructive and a diverse set of fieldwork experiences will set you up to make decisions in the field that result in learning the most while doing the least amount of damage. A second piece of advice is to know what you're getting into. Most jobs in archaeology require long bouts of travel away from friends and family as well as long hours, heat, poison ivy, chiggers, and tedious, repetitive work. It's not for everyone.

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

I take it with a grain of salt as long as they portray the people archaeologists study in a positive light. Attributing ancient feats of technology to aliens, however, is damaging because it implies that past people weren't sophisticated enough to pull them off. But they were people, just like we are, and some of them were master artists, architects, and engineers.

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

My least favorite question is when people ask how much an artifact is worth or where they can sell it. Reducing an artifact to its monetary value devalues the important things it can tell you when you consider it within its cultural and archaeological context.

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

I suggest learning more about archaeology in your area, the cultures that built it, and what their descendants are up to now. When you make the connection between the past and people who are still living today, you're more likely to value their history in a meaningful way. If you are able, get involved with your local university or state archaeological society, which may have field- or lab work for volunteers to help out with. There are also some great organizations, such as the Archaeological Conservancy, which will be happy to put your donations to good use protecting archaeological sites!

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

I started doing archaeology in the 1990s, after many trailblazing female archaeologists had already paved the way. I was also very fortunate in having (mostly male) advisors and field directors who promoted a positive work culture. At the same time, I didn't see a lot of representation of women in the highest positions in academic or CRM settings, and CRM crews in particular were male-dominated. And I probably took for granted many aspects of field culture that I would question now.

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

I don't think it made it more difficult to *become* an archaeologist, but it does pose some challenges that I imagine male colleagues don't encounter. Balancing work and family is more difficult for women than men across the workforce and many women leave archaeology and other fields for that reason.

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

I think I had to learn to speak up for myself in a way that women and girls aren't typically taught to do. To specifically ask to be taught how to use a total station, or be involved in a research project, etc., when male colleagues wouldn't have had to ask. I'll never forget Robbie Ethridge going through my graduate school applications with me and stripping out all the gendered language, which tended to hedge or undermine the points I was making. I had to consciously unlearn the way girls and women are taught to communicate

**19) What advantages unique to women did you enjoy?**

Well, I suppose it's nice to constantly exceed people's expectations, though the implication that you wouldn't is something we should all think about.

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

I think so. I think you'll always think about past people in a way that is influenced by your own experiences, even if just to contrast your experience with theirs. Since becoming a parent, for instance, I have thought about what it might be like to have an infant in the past. What did they do about diapers? Infants are a mess!

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

I think women have made a lot of theoretical and methodological contributions to the field that have forever changed it for the better. Someone once said to me that paleoethnobotany (the study of ancient plants) was "women's work." It's hard for me to imagine archaeological interpretations that completely ignore plants as food, medicine, and materials for textiles, baskets, and clothing, but we've only begun to incorporate these understandings in the last few decades, largely as a result of women's work

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

One of my favorite examples of women in the archaeological record is not an artifact at all, but rather a way of organizing space - a "neighborhood" made up of Mississippian houses clustered around central courtyards. Most southeastern Indian people were matrilineal. Women would have owned houses, agricultural fields, and other forms of property, and they would have been in charge of day-to-day happenings in these spaces. Seeing courtyards in the archaeological record brings to mind all the activities that would have happened in them - these are places where families would have worked together, cooked and shared food, planned their days, laughed, told stories, and instructed their children and grandchildren. And they were essentially women's spaces.



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