

Alabama Archaeology Month 2020

Interviewing Women in Archaeology



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Linda Derry

Site Director, Old Cahawba Archaeological Park

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Saluting Women in Archaeology



Linda Derry
Site Director
at Old Cahawba Archaeological Park

1) What is your educational background?

B.A. Southern Illinois University; graduate degree from the College of William and Mary

2) What are your primary research interests?

Community-based Archaeology, Historical Archaeology, and Cahawba and the Black Belt region.

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

It is a long story, which is told on this link:

http://digitaleditions.sheridan.com/publication/?i=65152&article_id=679605&view=articleBrowser

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

Old Cahawba, of course! - although Colonial Williamsburg, Bacon's Castle (the oldest brick house in America), early 17th century burials near Jamestown, remains of a house of prostitution on Pebble Beach Golf Course in California, and a mission destroyed by the 1906 San Francisco earthquake were all very interesting. I've been fortunate to have worked in many amazing places.

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

Jim Deetz - although he was known as one of the progenitors of scientific "New Archaeology," and one of the earliest archaeologists to use a computer, he stressed the importance of a good story, working on the margins of disciplines, being inclusive, and speaking in plain English rather than professional lingo.

Since I am old enough to have started in archaeology before there were many female mentors, I'd like to also mention some supportive colleagues that have been just as influential in my career as any mentor: Patti Jeppson, Maureen Malloy, & Carol McDavid.

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

Yes, but not as much in my current job as before. Before, in museum settings, I managed formal training programs for archaeology volunteers. Here, I have hosted an Archaeology Explorer post through the Boy Scouts, but otherwise our volunteers are mainly interested in preservation of the archaeological site through fundraising and awareness activities (rather than excavation). Of course, we have taken advantage of partnerships to do excavation, like AAS summer meetings and the University of Alabama's Expedition programs.

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

There are so many, but I'll mention a classic: Benjamin Franklin's home which was excavated for the U.S. bicentennial (1976). I like it because, after the excavation, the park service did NOT reconstruct an imagined house with lots of unknown details, instead they built a "ghost structure," a steel frame, that truly represented the size and shape of the original building based on knowledge gained from the excavation. They didn't make up details that they didn't know; they did not lie; they presented truthfully, and exactly the details that archaeology revealed, and left the rest to the public's imagination. I chose this because we seem to be living in a time of "fake news" and growing disrespect for science - a time when politics tries to trump truth (no pun intended). So, I feel that it is vitally important for us to protect the integrity of archaeological research and its presentation to the public. We should not break the trust that generations of archeologists have built with the public.

FYI. And I just recently (after choosing this example) learned that the idea for ghost structure was "hatched" by my mentor, Dr. Deetz to interpret the extinct Wellfleet Whaling Station Tavern on Cape Cod. He sent a slide of the idea to John L. Cotter of the Philadelphia Regional Office of the N.P.S in 1970, and that led to the use of the ghost structure idea at Franklin's House! (Even more amazing, Deetz actually used White Out from his office to draw the ghost structure on top of a slide of the excavated foundations, and my friend Dr. Jeppson, recently found it in NPS collections. It's a small world after all.

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

Discovering stories that were left out of written history. Learning the little details of everyday life that no one thought about recording and learning about the lives of those that are under-represented in written history, like women, children, enslaved people, and even just the average “guy.”

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

How often architecture seems to be privileged over archaeology - especially in funding.

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

Leslie “Skip” Stewart-Abernathy. He was a student of Jim Deetz and a station archaeologist in Arkansas. “Skip” was the most successful public archaeologist at the grassroots level that I know. He worked in community contexts with volunteers and avocational archaeologists. He helped people save cultural resources that were truly important to them. He told a good story. (Plus Dr. Abernathy married a smart woman and hyphenated his last name when he did!)

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

Get a graduate degree but also get plenty of work experience along the way. Find the archaeologist whose work you admire and try to work and study with her.

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

Well . . . some of it has been pretty good - for example, the Time Team series from British television.

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

“Have you found any gold yet?” This is my least favorite question because it seems to indicate that they are only thinking of monetary value, and we know, of course, the true value comes from the information and contextual evidence that tell forgotten true stories about our collective past.

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

At the most basic level, they can just become aware of archeology in their own neighborhood by learning a new way of seeing. If they can start noticing the above-ground archaeological remains all around them, like old-fashioned daffodils that mysteriously emerge in the woods behind their house each spring, or see the traces on the side of a building that indicate where another structure once stood, they will start wondering about these things. If they connect to them in some personal way, they are more likely to extend that sense of wonder and respect to archaeological sites. And if they can relate to these things, they will start to care about them, and then they will find ways to protect and preserve them.

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

Again, see the above mentioned link.

http://digitaleditions.sheridan.com/publication/?i=65152&article_id=679605&view=articleBrowser

In the beginning, I was turned away from some opportunities or discouraged because I was female. My department chairman, a well-known and respected archaeologist, called myself and two other female students

into his office and asked us if we wanted to have families of our own, if so, he said, then archaeology was not for us. I'm pretty sure he didn't have this same discussion with any male students.

16) What advantages unique to women did you enjoy?

For a short while, I worked as part of an all-woman crew which enjoyed affirmative action points in awarding contracts.

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

Perhaps, but I'd like to think that since American archaeologists are generally trained as anthropologists, that all of us are more opened-minded about looking at things from other points of view, and most of us tend to be critical thinkers about possible bias in our work.

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

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

I excavated around the base of a column that once supported a side yard porch of an antebellum mansion. On one side of the column, I found a thimble, a corset stay, and a part of an umbrella. On the other side we found a piece of a saddle and part of a tobacco pipe. This took me back in time, I could almost see a woman, perhaps an enslaved woman, sitting on the porch doing her mending with her husband sitting very nearby.

Or upon finding a woman's broken tombstone that read "She done what she could," my heart began to ache imagining the challenges she must have faced without the power that her husband must have had.

Or visiting the field that once held the site of my own grandfather's farmhouse. When I bent down and picked up pieces of broken plates from the first decade of the 20th century, I remembered that my eldest aunt had told me that she used broken plates as toy china when she played in this yard. I don't think I would have remembered her story about the poverty of her childhood, had I not held that artifact in my hand.