

Alabama Archaeology Month 2020

Interviewing Women in Archaeology



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Dr. Mary Cassandra Hill
Independent Contractor
in Forensic Archaeology
and Tuscaloosa City Schools System

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Saluting Women in Archaeology



Dr. Mary Cassandra Hill
Independent Contractor in Forensic Archaeology
at Independent Contractor Tuscaloosa City Schools System

1) What is your educational background?

A.B. University of Alabama/Tuscaloosa, English & Pre-med; M.A. University of Tennessee/Knoxville, Biological Anthropology with forensic anthropology focus; Ph.D. University of Massachusetts/Amherst, Biological Anthropology with human skeletal pathology focus; plus: Druid City Hospital diploma, surgical technical assistant; Shelton State Community College diploma, photography; Univ. of Mass./Amherst scientific illustration, and coursework towards Master of Public Health.

2) What are your primary research interests?

Biological Anthropology; Forensic identification; Bioarchaeology

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

I grew up in Moundville, AL, and had summer jobs in the labs at Mound State Park, and a lab job when I was an undergraduate.

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

All of my projects have been interesting. I can't single one out.

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

I can't single anyone out because I learned so much from all of my professors. I had field school from David DeJarnette. My M.A. thesis committee was William Bass, Richard Jantz, and Charles Faulkner. My Ph.D. committee was George Armelagos, R. Brooke Thomas, Arthur S. Keene, H. Martin Wobst, and Harris Pastides (who was Dean of the School of Public Health/ Univ. of South Carolina and then became Chancellor).

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

Yes, almost every project that I have worked on has had volunteers. The majority were good workers. Some just showed up for a few days (shovel bums) to be able to say that they had worked on a particular site.

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

So many !! I'm going to say Moundville, but I haven't had the opportunity to visit a lot of sites west of the Mississippi, or even in the eastern U.S. for that matter.

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

Dealing with JERKS [men and women; actually, more women than men].

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

I admire too many to pick one.

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

Yes. Be sure to have a Plan B.

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

It is not realistic, and therefore annoying. I have to remind myself that it is only a movie or TV show.

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

You must make a lot of money, right? You get to keep all of those things you dig up, right?

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

Always get permission to do ANYTHING. Be sure that you have tried to include all agencies.

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

It was notably gender biased in forensic anthropology and paleopathology. I frequently was the only female student in some of my classes.

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

I've had numerous instances of being told (by men) that they were surprised at my skills in field archaeology, and teaching and directing a crew. My response was that I had the same men teaching me field techniques that (the men) did. I've also had some similarly snarky comments from women in the field and the lab.

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

In my first experiences, field house accommodations were difficult. The men did not know how to handle being in the same small space with a woman in the mix.

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

Probably, because I'm more open to alternative interpretations of sites and features.

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

I don't know that I can pick a single person!

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

It's hard work, low pay, and archaeology jobs can be tough to find at times, but it can be incredibly rewarding work.

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

I don't mind the Hollywood "blockbuster" portrayals – *Indiana Jones*, *The Mummy*, etc. are all pretty clearly fiction and can be entertaining. The reality TV portrayals are more problematic, because they present highly skewed, frequently pseudoscientific, and destructive ideas and practices as if they are the non-fiction, mainstream version of archaeology. Shows like *Diggers*, *Ancient Aliens*, *Oak Island* promote unethical practices (site destruction), conspiracy theories, and deny people in the past any kind of agency or creativity.

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

"What is the coolest artifact you've ever found?" This question is my least favorite because for archaeologists, the interesting story is rarely about a single object; it's about the narratives that can be constructed through provenience, context, and the connections between artifacts, features, deposition, etc.

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

Reach out to your local archaeological associations (pretty much every state has them, and membership is open), contact professionals at State Historic Preservation Offices, and cultivate good relationships with private landowners who have sites on their properties. Archaeologists only have so much power (as granted by state laws), so the public is the front line for convincing landowners to provide access to properties so that sites can be located and documented.

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

There were few female archaeologists at my undergrad institution. I also realized that in going into southeastern archaeology, most of the academic positions and management positions in contract archaeology were held by men. This is still the case, but things are slowly changing in the discipline.

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

I've certainly been in positions where my authority has been challenged and the challenger turned to a male on the crew for answers. I have also noticed that there continue to be exclusionary groups within pockets of archaeology where only men get invited to participate in discussions, conference sessions, or publications.

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

Working in the field can be difficult at times when there are not restroom facilities.

26) What advantages unique to women did you enjoy?

My best friends are archaeologists and we uplift and celebrate each other's' accomplishments. That may not be unique to women, but when academia can be cutthroat and competitive, it's comforting to know there's group of strong women out there who have my back.

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

My decision to focus my research on daily experiences during period of turmoil is in part a response to some of the other trends in archaeology (especially when it comes to warfare) that have focused on elite men. I did not consciously set out to study women in the past, but in analyzing pottery and foodways, it's likely that women had a particularly large role in the production and use of pottery.

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

The domestication of plants and animals, agricultural practices, and their connections to the comes to mind. Farming tends to be perceived as a masculine profession in the US and that kind of perspective has bled into interpretations of the past. Yet, we know (from historical documents, from oral histories, from ethnographic research), women in parts of the indigenous Americas were responsible for agricultural. How might interpretations concerning the rise of complex societies change once there is more research on the roles that women played in the creation of food systems?

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

I found corset boning and metal eyelets at an Historic site once. It made me very glad that I do not have to wear clothes like that!



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