

# **THE IMPACT OF THE RIVER BASINS SURVEYS PROGRAM IN HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The River Basin Projects of the Post World War III era created an unprecedented threat to archaeological resources of the historic period on the Great Plains. Funding was provided to address this threat through the River Basin Survey, and an ambitious program of excavation on historic sites ensued. The impact of this work on the direction of historical archaeology on the Great Plains was significant in that it broadened the types of sites being investigated. The way the sites were selected, however, may have diminished the anthropological importance of the historic sites program in general.

## **Origins: The Direct-Historical Approach**

Historical archaeology made its first appearance on the Great Plains shortly after the turn of the 19th century with a methodology that was to become known as the "direct-historical approach." The direct-historical approach sought to address questions of the origins of the prehistoric Plains populations by working from the historic known to the unknown of the protohistoric and prehistoric periods. This approach was developed to address a specific archeological problem, and was firmly seated in anthropology.

The direct-historical approach was one of the fundamental approaches used in the archaeology of the Great Plains, and primarily the central and northern Great Plains, prior to World War II, and continues to be important to this day. Significant discussions of this approach are found in now classic works such as Strong's "Introduction to Nebraska Archeology" and Wedel's "Introduction to Pawnee Archeology," published in 1935 and 1936 respectively. Wedel, in 1938, and Strong, in 1940, published articles which served to substantially formalize this approach following work on the Central Plains Pawnee and in the northern Great Plains (Wedel 1938; Strong 1940). It was in Wedel's 1938 article that the term direct-historical approach was first formally presented (Willey and Phillips 1980: 108).

The direct-historical approach focused on the establishment of a baseline from which cultural and chronological sequences could be developed for the protohistoric and prehistoric past. According to Wedel:

It was believed that by isolating and clearly defining the archeological characteristics of the historic peoples a whole series of sites could soon be removed from the category of unknowns; and furthermore, that a comparison of materials so identified with earlier remains in the region might open lines of attack which would permit the establishing of a time sequence extending "from the known historic into the unknown prehistoric" [Wedel 1938:1].

In the context of pre-World War II archaeology, which to a large degree focused on problems of culture chronology and cultural-historical reconstruction, the direct-historical approach was intended to address a very significant question. Under this methodology, investigated sites were selected because of the information they could provide for the resolution of these questions—the focus was clearly on the problem rather than on the site. The direct-historical approach can be seen, therefore, to have developed as a vital part of the general anthropological approach to the prehistory of the Great Plains.

Certain characteristics of the direct-historical approach are important in understanding its relation to the subsequent development of historical archaeology on the Great Plains. Important among these are, first, that the direct-historical approach relied fundamentally on the historical archeological record but was itself concerned primarily with problems in prehistory and, related to this, that the direct-historical approach focused on American Indian sites to the exclusion of all others.

The use of historical archaeology in addressing problems in prehistory represents, significantly I believe, an unbiased use of the historical archeological record for general anthropological problem solving. Archeologists working on the Great Plains before World War II did not dichotomize prehistoric and historical archaeology but were rather led by the pursuit of a problem, enabling them to embrace any pertinent data or approach.

In the direct-historical approach, prehistory and history were correctly and necessarily viewed as a continuum with both history and prehistory contributing differently to the resolution of a common problem within anthropology. Of interest, this is a position that has been called for by Kent Lightfoot in a relatively recent article in *American Antiquity*.

The focus on American Indian sites was likewise an artifact of the problem on which the direct-historical approach was centered, but is nevertheless important in understanding subsequent development on the Great Plains. Prior to World War II there was little interest among archeologists in questions pertaining primarily to the historical period, and there was only minimal interest in sites other than the American Indian sites of use in the direct-historical approach. While the direct-historical approach can clearly be seen as an historical archeological methodology which developed out of archaeology and anthropology, this early anthropological foundation was insufficiently developed to deal adequately with the situation that was to develop on the Great Plains following World War II.

### **Transition: River Basin Salvage**

Following World War II an ambitious program of water resources control known as the Pick-Sloan Plan was implemented on the Central and Northern Great Plains. The need to identify and salvage sites threatened by the massive reservoirs planned within the Missouri River watershed led to the development of the Interagency Archeological Salvage Program. This program had the National Park Service and the Smithsonian Institution's River Basins Survey as major partners and relied on the cooperation of numerous academic institutions as well (Lehmer 1971).

In 1946, the newly formed Interagency Archeological Salvage Program began an unprecedented program of survey and excavation on the Great Plains that has yet to be equaled in scope and in which lies the origins of our nation's current cultural resource management programs (Jennings 1985; 281). Work under this program was organized by major reservoir projects and sub-basins, and included work at major reservoirs on the Missouri itself, such as the Oahe and Fort Randall reservoirs in South Dakota, as well as at smaller reservoirs on Missouri River tributaries, such as Wilson and Kanopolis lakes on the Smoky Hill River in Kansas.

Not only was the scope of archeological work following World War II unprecedented, the type and need of this work created new problems for the archeologist. These problems were caused to a large degree by the limited knowledge of archeological resources on the Great Plains; the imminent, wholesale loss through inundation of resources along massive stretches of major river valleys; the limited time frame available for archeological studies; a shortage of trained professionals; and at times severe budgetary constraints (Lehmer 1971, Jennings 1985). While these problems had important effects on all resources endangered by the Pick-Sloan reservoirs, they very clearly had the most profound effect on the historical archeological resource base.

The problem lay immediately with the need to consider a resource base for the fundamental reason that it was soon to be destroyed. In many cases this was an important opportunity in that it provided the mechanism for large scale intensive investigations of a problem. Exemplary of this was research on the late prehistoric and protohistoric village agriculturalists of the Middle Missouri. Sites of this period had been an important focus of research prior to the Interagency work, and received a somewhat disproportionate but not unjustified amount of the effort connected with the post-World War II boom.

As we have seen, however, there is little precedence from before World War II for historical archeological research on Euro-American sites and other sites falling outside the scope of the direct-historical approach. This lack of archeological interest or concern for these sites, representing the majority of the historic period resource base in any region, carried over into the post-World War II era.

When faced with the loss of the entire cultural resource base of much of the Missouri River Valley, however, the need for historical archaeology survey and salvage was not ignored and funding was provided starting in 1950. Partly because historians had been involved in historical research on the reservoirs prior to this funding, and partly because of lack of prior interest and an already overloaded work schedule among archeologists, the impetus for this historical archeological research did not come from anthropology but rather emanated from the field of history. As a result, while anthropologists were involved in all phases of site survey and salvage for prehistoric and protohistoric sites, historians provided the baseline from which the survey for and salvage of Euro-American sites was to be conducted.

A typical approach to the historical archeological resources of a reservoir project started with a detailed documents search conducted by a historian and which was intended to result in a list of historical archeological resources within a project area. An early and representative example of this approach is the historical overview of the Fort Randall Reservoir (now Lake Francis Case), South Dakota. Based on a detailed documents and literature review and a few brief field

expeditions, a comprehensive report on the historic sites of this reservoir project was prepared by historian Merrill J. Mattes and was available in 1948 (Mattes 1948). This report identified a total of 120 historic sites within the project area, which are summarized in Table 1. Of these 120 sites, it is important to note that 75—well over half—held little potential for archeological research (eg., 35 historic streams and 25 historic islands) (Mattes 1949).

<b>Table 1</b>	
<b>Historic sites identified through historical research within the Fort Randall Reservoir, South Dakota (Mattes 1949: 477)</b>	
<b>Site Type</b>	<b>Number</b>
Military post sites	3
Trading post sites	6
Existing towns and Indian agencies	4
Abandoned post offices, towns, settlements, and steamboat landings	8
Lewis and Clark camp sites, 1804 and 1806	15
Churches and cemeteries	4
Steamboat wrecks	6
Historic islands	25
Historic streams	35
Miscellaneous historic landmarks	6
Railroad and highway bridges	3
Total	120

This and similar reviews of historic sites imposed severe biases on the recognized historical resource base of a project area. A review of the 120 historic sites identified for the Fort Randall Reservoir, for example, shows that it focused on sites with a high historical visibility. A number of significant historical resource types with a lesser historical visibility are not included in this report with notable exceptions represented by early Euro-American homestead settlements and early reservation period American Indian settlements. But this is not presented critically; concepts of history and historical importance have changed in the past half-century and it is unfair to complain that those working then did not share our particular predispositions. What is important is the transference of design level research decisions concerning historical sites from archeologists to historians.

The resource assessments prepared by historians during this period served as the baseline for determining which sites were in need of excavation. Since funds were not available for the archeological investigation of all historic sites identified by these comprehensive studies, decisions on which sites to evaluate were required and were based on three criteria:

- (1) the degree of historical significance.
- (2) the extent of the available documentation on the site.
- (3) whether or not a documented site could actually be located in the field.

To illustrate the operation of this selection process in the Missouri Valley, Mattes states:

The Lewis and Clark expedition was unquestionably of epic importance, hence the explorers camp sites satisfy the first requirement. However, it would be difficult to make a case for archeological work at such sites since they would be virtually impossible to pinpoint. Steamboat landings, villages, missions, and other communities of fairly recent origin might bear such similarity to still-existent communities that archeological findings might not be rewarding. Three classes of sites, representative of significant frontier eras, offered the greatest promise. These were the trading posts, the military posts, and the early Indian agencies [Mattes 1960: 12].

This approach to site selection as well as the approach to the identification of sites in the reservoir area illustrate the significant role of the historian in the post-World War II archaeology of the historical period. Essentially, the historian would identify potential sites and then prioritize sites for excavation.

Another significant and related problem revolved around the involvement of the archeologist in this process. In most cases, the archeologist became involved only after sites had been prioritized, and served to find sites selected for excavation, to determine if excavation was feasible, and to design and execute the excavations. The result of this was that the archeologists involved in the excavation of a site were not charged with the investigation of any specific problem. Rather, they were excavating a site usually only because it was important in history. In retrospect, we can conclude that the vast majority of historic sites investigated during this period—especially Euro-American sites—were excavated simply as material illustrations of history.

The extent to which this period shaped the perceptions of historical archaeology on the Great Plains cannot, I believe, be overstated. The 20 years of intensive Interagency Archeological Salvage on the Central and Northern Great Plains resulted in a significant volume of historical archeological research (for example, G.H. Smith 1960a, 1960b, 1968, 1972; G.H. Smith and Ludwickson 1981; Miller 1960; Woolworth and Wood 1960; Krause 1972). While this research was generally of a high technical caliber, both on the part of the historians and archeologists involved and must be considered a substantive contribution to archaeology, there is no doubt that much of it suffered by its essentially historical orientation. The selection of sites because of their historic importance did nothing to write the history of the lives of historically disenfranchised peoples, as was being done with the cultural-historical approach in prehistory at the time, and it did nothing to develop a useful resource base for broad based comparative studies, such as were becoming important during the latter years of this period elsewhere in the country.

Sites excavated during this period, and particularly Euro-American sites, rarely did more than illustrate recorded history—excavation reports told us little that we did not already know (Thomas 1978: 276). The image that developed from this was of a discipline of historical archaeology that was hardly a part of anthropology, that was more properly considered within history or in many cases architectural history, and that was relatively uninteresting beyond the casual appeal of a relic of a vanished frontier.

## **Prelude to the Present**

The end of the Interagency Archeological Salvage work in 1969 corresponds roughly with the onset of the "new archaeology" and with the beginnings of a period of significant theoretical development within historical archaeology. Led by key theoretical contributions such as that by Fontana in 1965 (Fontana 1965), Deetz and Dethlefsen in 1967 (Deetz and Dethlefsen 1967), Cleland and Fitting in 1968 (Cleland and Fitting 1968), Schulyer in 1970 (Schulyer 1970), South in 1971 (South 1971), and Leone in 1973 (Leone 1973), as well as by the debate surrounding Dollar's position in a 1968 paper (Dollar 1968, see also Cleland and Fitting 1968, Fontana 1968), historical archaeology emerged, perhaps with the rest of archaeology at this same time, as a dynamic sub-discipline within anthropology.

With some exception, however, this emergence of a historical archaeology tied to anthropology has emanated from the eastern United States, where the roots of historical archaeology are perhaps much more closely intertwined with history than anthropology than is found on the Great Plains (see, for example, Fish 1910, Woodward 1937, Harrington 1955, Walker 1967, and Dollar 1968). Although the reasons for this strong eastern influence in the recent development of historical archaeology are not of interest here, the lack of substantive contribution from the Great Plains, where the origins of historical archaeology can be traced to anthropology, is of importance.

It is my conclusion that the early trends in the development of historical archaeology as an integral focus of anthropology on the Great Plains became a victim of the archeological emergency which resulted in the interagency archeological program in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, and was further hampered by the relatively low level of research funding after that period. Not to belittle the contribution made by Great Plains archeologists working on historical sites during this period, which was great, or to deny today's participation of Great Plains historical archeologists within the mainstream of current theory, which is clear, it appears that the early alliance of historical archaeology and anthropology on the Great Plains came to a premature end with the onslaught of an archeological program of unprecedented scope for which the profession was not adequately equipped. Nonetheless, when historical archaeologists practice on the Great Plains, we do stand on the shoulders of a generation of hard working River Basin Survey archaeologists, and to them we are grateful.

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