

# AMERICAN ANTIQUITIES

REVISITING THE ORIGINS OF  
AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

TERRY A. BARNHART



“Americans are reminded constantly of our ‘diverse’ modern society. In his important and interesting book, Barnhart shows readers that diverse aboriginal cultures occupied the American continent for thousands of years. *American Antiquities* contains detailed, substantial, and well-referenced information on the early historic encounter with ancient America and its implications.”—**FRANCIS P. MCMANAMON**, general editor of *Archaeology in America: An Encyclopedia*

“Terry Barnhart is notably the world’s foremost expert on E. G. Squier. This work broadens the discussion [of mound building] by picking up earlier influences on nineteenth-century speculations about the Ohio Valley mounds, as well as delving into more of the impact of Squier on his contemporaries. Barnhart has pulled together a number of contributors to the history of mound builders that are not in other histories of the field. This volume provides a rich new perspective on this component of American antiquarianism.”—**DAVID L. BROWMAN**, author of *Cultural Negotiations: The Role of Women in the Founding of Americanist Archaeology*

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Writing the history of American archaeology, especially concerning eighteenth- and nineteenth-century arguments, is not always as straightforward as it might seem. Archaeology's trajectory from an avocation to a semi-profession to a specialized profession, rather than being a linear progression, was an untidy organic process that emerged from the intellectual tradition of antiquarianism. It then closely allied itself with the natural sciences throughout the nineteenth century, especially with geology and the debate about the origins and identity of the indigenous mound-building cultures of the eastern United States.

In his reexamination of the eclectic interests and equally varied settings of nascent American archaeology, Terry A. Barnhart exposes several fundamental, deeply embedded historiographical problems within the secondary literature relating to the nineteenth-century debate about "Mound Builders" and "American Indians." Some issues are perceptual, others contextual, and still others are basic errors of fact. Adding to the problem are semantic and contextual considerations arising from the problematic use of the term "race" as a synonym for tribe, nation, and race proper—a concept and construct that does not in all instances translate into current understanding and usage. *American Antiquities* uses this early discourse on the mounds to reframe perennial anthropological problems relating to human origins and antiquity in North America.

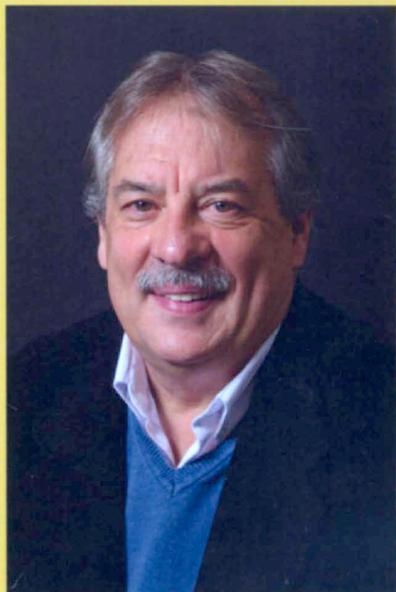


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**TERRY A. BARNHART** is a professor of history at Eastern Illinois University. He is the author of *Ephraim George Squier and the Development of American Anthropology* (Nebraska, 2005).

Jacket image is from the interior

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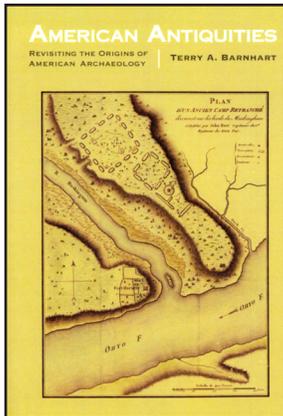
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## American Antiquities: Revisiting the Origins of American Archaeology

Terry A. Barnhart (2015) *Critical Studies in the History of Anthropology Series*, University of Nebraska Press. xviii+572 pp., 28 figures, (\$75.00 paper).

*Reviewed by Kenneth B. Farnsworth, Illinois State Archaeological Survey, Prairie Research Institute, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.*

In an editor's introduction to Terry Barnhart's new 572-page book on the early history of American archaeology, series editors Regna Darnell and Stephen Murray provide readers with a crisp overview of the historical context of his study:

“Barnhart seizes on changing theories about the Mound Builders as a lens through which to examine the antiquarian origins of American archaeology. *Ephraim George Squier and the Development of American Archaeology, 1821–1888*, his previous book in the *Critical Studies in the History of Anthropology* series [2005] approached the monumental mounds of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys biographically, through the work of their most significant early analysts. Ephraim Squier, with his colleague Edwin Davis, produced a seminal work based on their firsthand survey of these remains, *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* [*Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge, 1848*]. The recently established Smithsonian Institution was the scientific arm of the U.S. government and its commitment to scientific evidence as a basis for territorial expansion was profound. In this work, Barnhart enlarges his scope to frame the mound-builder debate in a larger intellectual context, one that would set the methodological tone for the archaeology of pre-Columbian North American sites that came later. American science debated these complex issues with full awareness of the heavy stakes for purported American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny.”

“The story is a fascinating one, with actors shifting sides, and similar issues surfacing across generations of excavation, private collecting, museum display, and often contentious public debate and publication. Barnhart meticulously follows subplots and characters and identifies his own interpretations of what cannot be documented directly, leaving readers sufficient information to judge for themselves.... Polygenists thought that the different races had distinct origins and that some, at least, were inherently incapable of attaining a state of civilization, thus justifying conquest and removal. Monogenists were more optimistic, postulating a single origin for the human species.... Mosaic chronology, the relationship of the Mound Builders to Central and South American civilizations or to historic Indian populations, priority of fieldwork over armchair philosophy, American

## Book Review

exceptionalism in light of apparent relative European antiquity, amateur versus professional archaeological practice, and the emergence of institutional infrastructure recognizable as the archaeology of today are the author's primary concerns."

Barnhart's historical research includes detailed evaluations of early field records, excavation reports and regional excavation-overview studies, scientific meetings presentations, fieldwork and administrative files, and surviving correspondence, and shows that in addition to political philosophy, religious beliefs, religious relativism, and evolutionary science all played significant roles in nineteenth-century archaeological scholarship:

...[Stephen D. Peet] sought to promote the aims of anthropological science within the framework of his own religious convictions and those of like-minded readers. He managed to harmonize his archaeological and theological pursuits, at least to his own satisfaction, over a long career as the editor of the *American Antiquarian* and author of several books on various subjects in American archaeology. Yet Peet clearly turned his face against those in the scientific community who, as he believed, sought to banish God from anthropology altogether." (Chapter 6: *Archaeology as Anthropology*, p. 382)

Such philosophical differences spurred on religious, political, historical, and anthropological scholarly excavators of all stripes in their headlong efforts to collect and interpret as many dramatic artifacts as possible from prehistoric American human graves to support their theories (often in competition with numerous relic-hunters who looted-out all such antiquities solely for their monetary value).

In evaluating the practical effect of all this excavation activity on modern archaeological studies, it is important to emphasize that the bulk of the 19th-Century archaeological excavations Barnhart discusses was laser-focused on monumental (usually mortuary) earthworks, primarily in the eastern and midwestern United States. The great majority of these mortuary sites dated to just the final 15 percent or so of eastern and midcontinental prehistory—dating to Early Woodland through Mississippian times in the region. From the early 19th Century through the mid 20th century, literally tens of thousands of aboriginal graves dating to these late prehistoric times in the East and Midwest were excavated, often with little careful documentation of their associated mortuary structures, archaeological contexts, individual graves, and burial artifacts. Sadly, this was also a time when excavators and laboratory scholars had minimal ability to reliably distinguish between even male vs. female remains, let alone evidence for social structure or mortuary ritual, within-mound sequences of mortuary activity, regional temporal contexts, or evidence for interregional trade. In other words, most of these early "studies" were more visceral and emotional than they were scientific.

The flavor of Terry Barnhart's intellectual history of 19th-Century American Archaeology is nicely captured by one of his frontispiece quotes—taken from an 1869

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article by Ephraim G. Squier (entitled “*Tongues from Tombs*”) published in *Frank Leslie’s Weekly* magazine:

*“All written history is young, and even the voice of tradition sinks into a low and unintelligible whisper as we penetrate the mighty past and strive to learn the secrets of antiquity.”*

This volume is an important history of the intellectual, political, religious, and treasure-hunting roots of North American archaeology. It should be thoughtfully read in depth and at leisure by today’s American archaeologists and anthropologists and their students. Anyone interested in the diverse motivations for the massive and widespread 19th-Century archaeological excavations at American mortuary sites of later prehistoric times would be well served to read Terry Barnhart’s *American Antiquities*.