

New Life for Archaeological Collections

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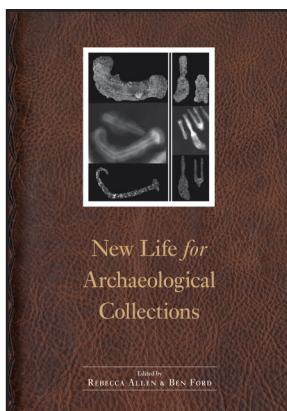
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New Life for Archaeological Collections

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In 1981, a group of scholars gathered for the “Conference on the Research Potential of Anthropological Museum Collections.” They were interested in addressing a fundamental premise in archaeology: applying the scientific method using existing repository (e.g., museum) collections to replicate results. They wanted to know what could be learned from “excavating” collections and how such studies could advance our understanding of the past. The participants considered the application of new analytical techniques using extant collections; shared methods for solving the inherent problems associated with researching such materials; presented their analyses as case studies; and reflected on the impacts that collecting and curatorial practices have on the future of access and use.

Their papers (Cantwell et al. 1981) laid the groundwork for many others (e.g., Childs 1995, 2004; Childs and Warner 2019; Lindsay et al. 1979, 1980; Marquardt et al. 1982; Sullivan and Childs 2003; Thompson 2000) to sound off on a slew of crucial topics surrounding archaeology’s curation crisis. Nearly 40 years later, Rebecca Allen and Ben Ford’s edited volume, *New Life for Archaeological Collections*, offers an updated take on these topics and provides powerful case studies that demonstrate the benefits of revisiting curated collections.

New Life is organized into three parts. The first addresses access use and preservation of extant collections while the second presents new research utilizing existing materials. The final section considers “new futures” of collections and their significance beyond research. The introduction by Allen, Ford, and Kennedy clearly identifies the value in researching existing collections: the ability to ask new questions of “old” data, apply different methodological techniques and theoretical approaches and undertake broad, comparative studies. They emphasize the ethical, and in some cases, legal obligations that archaeologists have to long-term collections preservation. The issues that make up the curation crisis are summarized, although key references are not cited (e.g., Childs and Sullivan 2003; Childs 2004; Lindsay 1979, 1980; Marquardt 1982). While the authors provide definitions for “legacy” and “orphaned” collections, the crucial matter of ownership is absent from their discussion and throughout the volume. (For more thorough definitions of these terms, see Archaeological Collections Consortium 2016; Cato et al. 2003; MacFarland and Vokes; Voss 2012; West 1988).

Part one highlights approaches to accessibility and sustainability once access has been established. In chapter one, Morehouse outlines steps taken by the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory (MAC Lab) to create and promote access to the state’s culture

history. After selecting 34 of the most significant sites, staff rehoused, inventoried, cataloged, databased, created finding aids, and identified conservation needs for collections and digitized associated records. These efforts led to the creation of exhibits and the development of web-based resources (e.g., Diagnostic Artifacts in Maryland); established a research fellowship; and instituted a variety of educational programs using the collections. The MAC Lab case study is a stellar example of collections access for a variety of stakeholders.

Farris (Ch. 2) follows with a view from California State Parks. The creation of the State Archaeological Collections Research Facility established a collaborative environment for collections research that has yielded an impressive number of theses, dissertations and articles. Farris, like Williams and Ridgway (Ch. 6), discusses the delicate balance between providing collections access while also ensuring preservation. Williams and Ridgway note that a multi-disciplinary approach—one that includes dialog between conservators, collections specialists and archaeologists—is paramount in striking a balance between the two.

Ben Ford's (Ch. 3) chapter introduces the reader to Hanna's Town, arguably the most important late 18th-century historic site in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. Ford utilizes the Hanna's Town materials in his teaching. In concert with the Westmoreland County Historical Society, his students have conducted research (see Smith's Ch. 8); and embarked on everything from rehousing the artifacts into archival storage containers to designing ARCMAP GIS and Microsoft Access relational database systems. The practical, hands-on application of archaeology and the skill sets learned are invaluable for his students as they pursue professional careers.

Similarly, Heath, and her colleagues at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, have spent the last decade assessing a series of important Virginia plantation sites, including their current project of re-evaluating the Curls Neck site (Ch. 5). The Curls Neck assessment focused on digitization of paper records, converting documents into readable text, and migrating older digital data into accessible formats. The authors rightly point out that digital data must be actively managed to be usable. They encourage archaeologists to develop policies and procedures to carry out scheduled migration and data backup, adopt consistent metadata standards, and create a curation plan before fieldwork begins.

Galle, Bollwerk, and Neiman (Ch. 4) discuss the design and expansion of the Digital Archaeological Archives of Comparative Slavery (DAACS). With careful planning, forethought, and input from a steering committee, DAACS has become a powerful research tool that contains aggregated data sets, detailed contextual information, and consistent cataloging standards and nomenclature.

Part two of the volume contains case studies detailing new discoveries made by a cadre of historical archaeologists. It begins with Hatch and McMillan's (Ch. 7) reanalysis and new interpretations of the Appamattucks community in 17th century Chesapeake society. It is followed by Smith's (Ch. 8) examination of faunal remains from Hanna's Town where she sheds light on the food practices of colonial inhabitants on the edge of the frontier. Kennedy's research (Ch. 9) of the Market Street Chinatown

collections identifies the limitations of working with extant materials, including the lack of control over field recovery strategies. He reflects on “working backwards;”: designing research questions that fit excavated material.

González and Salvato (Ch. 10) and Crise et al. (Ch. 11) outline the application of x-ray and 3-D technology using existing collections, respectively. González and Salvato combined an old technology (x-ray) with a new approach: x-radiography of metal objects flagged as “indeterminate,” because corrosion has masked the object’s form and diagnostic features. Crise and colleagues report on laser scanning and photogrammetry of timbers from the Royal Savage, a Revolutionary War vessel, to digitally reconstruct its physical characteristics. Noack-Myers details her work re-curating the “Post Ouiatanon” in Indiana (Ch. 12). Using field maps, notebooks and archaeologist’s recollections, she created a master map in GIS, consolidating disparate sets of spatial data; established metadata to standardize the terms; and sheds light on unexpected events that impact the ability for the original researcher to continue on, in this case, the death of a spouse.

Part three details the creative ways that existing collections can be utilized beyond research. Ehringer and Allen (Ch. 13) take us through their journey excavating collections from the Cooper-Molera Adobe Complex. Like Noack-Myers, they interviewed former archaeologists who worked there, and digitized and organized the materials into a coherent fashion. They provide useful suggestions for working with legacy collections.

Paresi et al. (Ch. 14), Rivers Cofield and Shaffer (Ch. 15) and Samford and Green (Ch. 16) describe innovative ways to bring collections to the public. Paresi and colleagues at the National Park Service’s Northeast Museum Services Center rely on social media platforms to engage the public. Using pop culture as a driver, Rivers Cofield and Shaffer created an “Artifacts of Outlander” exhibit, based on the television series Outlander, to promote and interpret Maryland’s past. Samford and Green bring archaeology into the K–12 classroom. Guided by archaeologists from the MAC Lab, students and staff at Huntingtown High in Baltimore explore Maryland’s past through hands-on activities designed to meet curriculum standards.

The book closes with an important contribution by Augé et al. (Ch. 17) who present a case study from the University of Montana’s Anthropological Curation Facility. Repository personnel established a working relationship with Montana tribes to develop culturally-mindful care and handling policies and procedures.

New Life for Old Collections is a testament to what innovation, persistence, curiosity and collaboration can bring to bear on our understanding of the archaeological record. While the issue of ownership is not addressed in the literal sense—as in a repository accepting a collection into its facility and becoming the legal and financial steward of the collection or agreeing to curate a collection owned by another entity—the authors address it figuratively—in the sense of “adopting” a collection for the purposes of research. The authors clearly illustrate the inherent value in and responsibility to utilize existing collections. Because preservation and access are interwoven it takes a village to do both effectively and requires a team effort by many stakeholders. While it is

well established that collections-based research (CBR) is a good thing (e.g., King 2016) this volume reminds us of that and will inspire many to get on the CBR-train, to buck what Brian Fagan (1995) called “Archaeology’s Dirty Secret,”: the trend in archaeology to dig, dig, dig and shirk the responsibilities that we have for publication and preservation. *New Life* reminds us to adopt a holistic approach to our archaeological practice.

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