

# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF AMERICAN *Childhood and Adolescence*



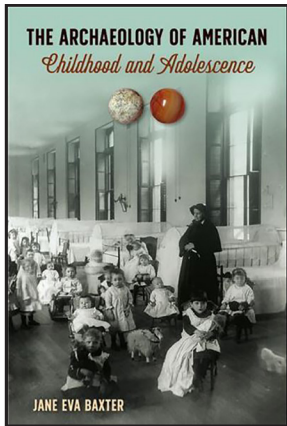
## CONTENTS

List of Figures ix

Series Foreword xi

Acknowledgments xv

1. Archaeologies of American Childhoods 1
  2. Material and Social Histories of Childhood and Adolescence  
in the United States 22
  3. Children in Their Living Spaces: Nineteenth-  
and Twentieth-Century Domestic Sites 67
  4. Institutions for Children and Children at Institutions 95
  5. Children's Bodies and Commemorations of Children 124
  6. The Archaeology and Material Culture  
of Contemporary Childhood 152
- References Cited 181
- Index 201



## The Archaeology of American Childhood and Adolescence

Jane Eva Baxter. 2019. [The University Press of Florida](#). xvii+202 pp., 31 figures, references. \$80.00 (Hardcover).

*Reviewed by Robert C. Chidester, The Mannik & Smith Group, Inc., Maumee, Ohio*

*The Archaeology of American Childhood and Adolescence* is the 21st entry in the University Press of Florida's series *The American Experience in Archaeological Perspective*, edited by Michael Nassaney. Baxter was, without a doubt, the perfect choice for this particular assignment, as she has done more

than any other American historical archaeologist to promote the concept of "childhood" as an important analytical lens in the study of the modern world. In her acknowledgments, Baxter admits that it took Nassaney a decade to convince her that she had something new to say about the subject. Historical archaeologists are lucky that Nassaney was ultimately successful, as Baxter has produced a very useful handbook that points other archaeologists toward a praxis in which children and adolescents are evident in all the social contexts typically examined by historical archaeologists.

As is to be expected in this type of volume, Baxter begins with an Introduction that provides an overview of the archaeology of childhood and argues for its importance. It may seem obvious once stated, but the reality that children were not only present but were active social actors contributing to the formation of archaeological sites in the past is one that archaeologists too frequently ignore. Typically, the presence of children is only acknowledged at specific types of institutional sites such as schools, or when specific types of artifacts often associated with children (toys, writing slates, etc.) are recovered. By reducing children to largely silent, passive participants in past societies, however, archaeologists miss the richness of childhood as "a social construction that is historically, culturally, and socially variable, [as well as] the [negotiated] meaning of childhood" (p. 2) as a discursive social category.

Following a second chapter that summarizes the primary interpretive approaches that historians of the U.S. have taken toward the study of childhood, Baxter explicitly structures the remainder of the book along thematic and contextual lines rather than chronologically. She lays out five primary thematic frameworks that she believes capture the distinctly "American" experience of childhood (insofar as this experience can be so reductively described): Children as Risk and Children as Opportunity; Diversity (social, economic and geographic); Consumerism; Space; and Disruption due to War and Warfare. She follows these five themes through three spatial realms that are frequently studied by archaeologists that have been present in every period of American history, and where children in the past were ubiquitous: domestic sites, social institutions (including both institutions designed specifically for children, such as schools and orphanages, as well as institutions designed for adults, such as poorhouses), and cemeteries.

## Book Review

Baxter concludes her book with an examination of modern childhood (defined roughly as beginning in the third quarter of the 20th century) through the lens of contemporary archaeology. This final chapter is Baxter's most innovative, as it brings together more established topics such as the creation of consumer subjectivity in children and gender ideologies manifested in children's toys with newer concerns in historical archaeology such as the historical genealogy of modern landscapes as well as archaeological approaches to digital material culture. Baxter also uses this chapter to draw theoretical and methodological connections between the work of historical and contemporary archaeologists with that of cultural anthropologists and historians of material culture.

Baxter's well-written monograph has many strengths. It is fluidly written and could easily be used as a required text in undergraduate courses. Baxter's prose is concise and understandable. She never uses theoretical or methodological jargon unnecessarily, and where it is necessary, she deftly explains its meaning in terms that non-specialists can easily understand. She has also done an excellent job of pulling relevant examples from a sometimes excruciatingly thin literature on the subject, with the help of many sources from unpublished student theses and dissertations as well as cultural resources management gray literature. Impressively, although Baxter is herself one of the two or three most widely published experts on the archaeology of childhood in any chronological or geographical context, her own research never dominates her discussions of specific topics.

Perhaps the most important feature of *The Archaeology of American Childhood and Adolescence*, however, is Baxter's choice to use a thematic framework rather than a chronological one. This choice has two important consequences. First, it centers the importance of childhood as an analytical framework. Childhood (and adolescence) is not a universally understood social/temporal/biological category, and Baxter does an excellent job of examining the diversity of experiences and understandings of childhood at any given time during the past four hundred years of American history, as well as important patterns in how these experiences and understandings changed over time. Second, by taking this approach, Baxter provides a framework that any historical archaeologist can apply to their own research and ask new questions of their data. This extends to her inclusion of contemporary archaeology, which is all too often considered to be a distinct approach with its own methods and concerns in historical archaeology.

*The Archaeology of American Childhood and Adolescence* is a strong entry in the American Experience in Archaeological Perspective series, even by this series' own strong standards. If Baxter's relatively slim monograph (180 pages of primary text) has any weaknesses, they were not apparent to this reviewer and are more than made up for by its strengths. While the content is geared toward those who study the post-contact period in North America, its perspective will undoubtedly be useful to any archaeologist interested in a more holistic understanding of the past.