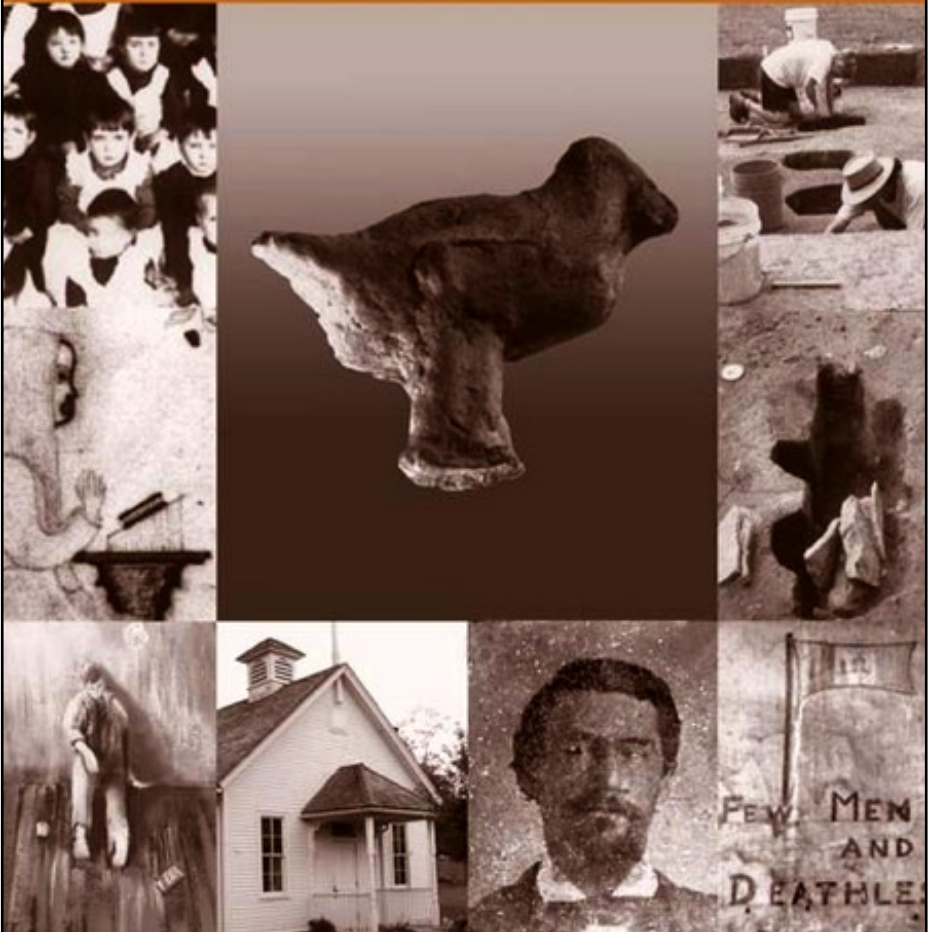


# The Archaeology of Institutional Life

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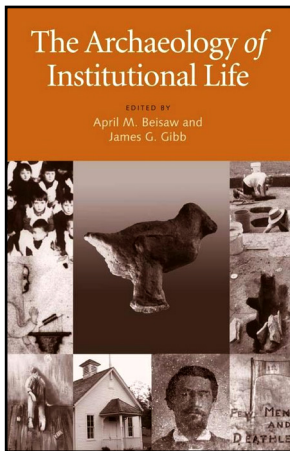
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## The Archaeology of Institutional Life

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*Reviewed by Russell K. Skowronek, Departments of History and Philosophy & Psychology and Anthropology, University of Texas Pan American.*

"Institutional Life"—the words alone connote popular images created in books and films about the loss of freedom and identity, regimented lives, resistance, and brutality. These may range from "insane" asylums (e.g., "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," "Amadeus") to prisons (e.g., "Cool Hand Luke," "The Longest Yard," "The Birdman of Alcatraz," "The Green Mile"), orphanages ("Oliver Twist"), schools ("Tom Brown's School Days," "Anne of Green Gables"), and POW camps ("Stalag 17," "Bridge Over the River Kwai," "King Rat," "The Great Escape"). As memorable as these images are we must ask how accurate these representations are and where "institutional life" fits in the larger milieu of life.

In the fourteen chapters that comprise *The Archaeology of Institutional Life*, editors April M. Beisaw and James G. Gibbs and colleagues from the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia show how institutions permeate life and can offer insights into social history. The chapters are divided into four thematic sections dealing with "Method and Theory," and the study of institutions of "Education," "Communality," and "Incarceration."

The book opens with a terrific humanizing introduction by Gibbs on how institutions permeate and structure life and change behavior. Their archaeological study can offer insights into social history which would otherwise be unknown. It is followed by a brief essay by Sherene Baugher documenting earlier archaeological research on institutions. In it she emphasizes that it is this work which provides otherwise unknown insights into "the lives of the people who worked, fought, played, laughed, cried, cooperated, resisted, lived, and died in these diverse institutions" (p. 13).

Section I of the book, "Method and Theory," provides two distinct approaches to its study. The first by Eleanor Conlin Casella explores various

philosophical approaches to the study of institutional life including criminal justice and sociology. She goes on to explore how the inmates negotiated confinement. Topics included "punishment, reform and deterrence," "domination and resistance," "reform, respite, ritual," and "coping, survival, and exchange."

p. 249

In Chapter 4, Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood applies feminist theory to the historical archaeology of institutions. She shows how feminist theories give insights which are usually lacking in histories by showing the place of women in social agency. There is a discussion of how "Feminist," "Marxist-Feminist," "Liberal Feminist," and "Feminist Queer" approaches can shed light on the inmates and staff who were associated with the institutions.

The last chapter in this section by Beisaw considers "institution-specific" site formation models. Beisaw focuses on the study of one-room schools and notes that the school and its associated outbuildings and schoolyard represent a site "type" very different from domestic sites. Her closing sentence is important to archaeologists who study institutions as all these "sites should be expected to have produced fewer possessions than regulations" (p.66).

Following Beisaw's chapter is Section II of the book which considers "Institutions of Education." This work anticipated what is now a growing body of recent archaeological scholarship on this topic including Laurie Wilkie's (2010) *Lost Boys of Zeta Psi: A Historical Archaeology of Masculinity at a University Fraternity*, and Skowronek and Lewis' (2010) *Beneath the Ivory Tower, the Archaeology of Academia*. The two chapters found in *The Archaeology of Institutional Life* consider a one-room school house and an "Indian" school. In the former, Deborah Rotman considers how "Rural Education and Community Social Relations" are played out at Schoolhouse No. 8 in Tippecanoe County, Indiana. She notes that schools were loci of social, theatrical, political, and religious activities in rural America. She points out that the domestic artifacts associated with such structures are very different from those found at nearby dwelling sites. In the case of ceramics those found represented the service used for company or "special" occasions. As such they express the ideologies of the community in this very public setting. Rotman proposes the creation of "artifact biographies" to help researchers interpret the activities, be they curricular or community, and the social relations which occurred at these dynamic locations.

In Chapter 7 Owen Lindauer examined a century of "Individual Struggles and Institutional Goals" at the Phoenix Indian School in Arizona. From 1891–1990 Hopi students were educated at the school. Archaeological research has revealed evidence for life at the school for both students and teachers. Lindauer notes that two identities are easily identified. One was that of the school and the student. Combs, toothbrushes, and uniform



buttons mark the world of the government-run schools. These institutions sought to transform Indian youth into "American" adults. Resistance to this transformation is also revealed in the form of fetishes, effigies, and flaked glass tools.

p. 250

Section III turns to "Institutions of Communalism"—orphanages, poor houses, and religious communes. In "The Orphanage at Schuyler Mansion," Lois Feister considers a late nineteenth-century Roman Catholic orphanage. She found that this was not a scene out of "Oliver Twist," rather it was the picture of the middle class in the Victorian age. Child-play refuse included doll parts and tea sets. These toys were used as a form of therapy to allow children to play "grown-up" without parents in a compassionate setting that reflected the reform movement which was first embraced in this era.

In Chapter 9 Suzanne Spencer-Wood embraces a feminist approach in the study of a poorhouse in Falmouth, Massachusetts. In operation for the last three quarters of the nineteenth century, the structure is still standing and has been adaptively reused. Though archaeological evidence was limited, it did point to the impoverishment of the residents. Many items were already old when they were lost. That said, the documentary record from the site is very rich. From it Spencer-Wood was able to discuss how inmates were segregated and how gender influenced work and production. She notes that Falmouth was "concerned more with assisting the poor than with moralistically reforming them in the belief that the poor were to blame for their poverty" (pg. 136). Certainly this message has been lost in this country over the past century.

Stephen Warfel wrote the last chapter in this section and considered "Ideology, Idealism, and Reality" in the Ephrata Commune located west of Philadelphia near Reading, Pennsylvania. Established in 1732 as a German religious commune it consisted of two celibate orders devoted to discipline and suffering and some married families. Seven years of archaeological investigations of twenty one of the original thirty structures provided an alternative perspective on the past. As Warfel (p. 149) put it, "... the documentary record of the past is intentional... The archaeological record, on the contrary, is an unintentional record of the past." And, "Significantly, neither record alone provides an entirely accurate interpretation of past behavior."

"Institutions of Incarceration" is the topic of Section IV. Three chapters explore a POW camp, a prison, and an asylum. Each considered confinement in thought-provoking ways. David Bush studied Johnson Island Military Prison, a Union Civil War-era POW camp located in the Ohio waters of Lake Erie. Johnson Island was built to detain or hold these men and not to punish or reform them. During the three years of the camp's operation prisoners maintained their Southern cultural identity by re-creating social and

religious organizations and commemorating them with handicrafts, including the carving of pipes and canes and the fabrication of jewelry out of shell, metal, and gutta-percha or hard black rubber.

p. 251

Eleanor Conlin Casella considered the graffiti-covered walls of prisons to see if there were discernible patterns in their placement and theme. She observed six themes in an international search which included Australia, England, Ireland, Italy, and the United States: resistance, identity, dignity under adversity, separation, diversion and amusement, and testimony. Having personally found graffiti in a college setting made this a very thought provoking read.

The last chapter in this section by Susan Piddock focused on asylums for the insane in Australia. We learn that when first constructed their function was to restrain the inmates to protect both them and others. Later, these were seen as places for treatment. Piddock's work did not rely on the traditional material record. Rather she contrasts the "ideal" asylum with those that were constructed and finds that there was a failure to meet even the basic standards of the era.

The book concluded with a reflection on "The Future of the Archaeology of Institutions" by Lu Ann De Cunzo. In addition to providing a brief overview of the chapters, De Cunzo calls for those studying "Institutions" to situate their sites within the precepts of landscape and architectural archaeology. She closes with the observation that "Institutions reproduce societies, and are dynamic indicators of societies' highest values and deepest fears" (pg. 213).

Should a second edition be contemplated, I would hope the press would consider expanding the number of illustrations of graffiti and artifacts as this reader was hungry for more. That said, *The Archaeology of Institutional Life* is a welcome addition to a growing scholarship on the topic of institutional life. Beisaw and Gibb are to be commended for bringing together a broad spectrum of international scholars to shed light on the institutions which are a very visible part of life in the modern nation-states of the world. Those engaged in archaeological or sociological research will find this book filled with insights appropriate to both the classroom and the scholar's garret.

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