



AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY AT A CROSSROADS

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American archaeology is under attack. Academic research is facing draconian funding cuts, current grants are being canceled, university departments are scaling back, and foreign graduate students are threatened with deportation. Simultaneously, applied archaeology is reeling from the firing of federal archaeologists, layoffs of state and tribal archaeologists, canceling of existing projects, and waiving archaeological requirements for future undertakings. Not surprisingly, the archaeological community is consumed with fighting the administration's onslaughts. But taking a step back, these current assaults represent an acceleration of forces at play for decades. American archaeology, founded in the academy as a scientific and humanistic enterprise, has largely become an applied service. American archaeology needs to recognize this transformation and to change its orientation, practice, and training.

A Brief History of Archaeoeconomics

For the first half of the twentieth century, American archaeology was an academic endeavor, conducted by scholars at universities and museums. It was largely funded by the Smithsonian Institution, wealthy individuals, and private institutions. In 1954, two "senior" grants for archaeological research were awarded by the National Science Foundation's (NSF) newly inaugurated "Anthropology and Related Sciences" program. These grants paved the way for the NSF to emerge in the 1960s as the major funding source for academic archaeological research. In 1968, the NSF awarded just over \$2 million in senior archaeological grants, the equivalent of about \$15 million in 2020 dollars (Yellen and Greene 1985). Since then, NSF funding for senior research grants in archaeology measured in constant dollars has declined steadily. In FY 2020, the NSF awarded about \$3.5 million in archaeology senior research grants and \$2.5 million for archaeological research in other competitions, a 60% decrease over 52 years (Altschul 2021). The job market for academic archaeologists has been stagnant, if not declining, for the last 15 years.

In 1966, the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) was enacted, quickly followed by the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), the Archaeological and Historic Preservation Act (1974), and the regulations implementing Section 106 of NHPA (1974). Together, these laws and regulations fundamentally altered American archaeology. In 1968, the US Department of the Interior's Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation

funded \$1.7 million of historic preservation activities, the equivalent of about \$13 million in FY 2020 dollars (Knudson and McManamon 1992). These activities have become an industry, known as cultural resource management (CRM), with \$1.4 billion in FY 2020 expenditures and more than 16,000 full-time equivalent positions, of which about 12,000 are filled by archaeologists (Altschul and Klein 2022).

Today, about 90% of all US archaeologists work in CRM, and about 93% of all money spent on archaeology is CRM related. Given that, one would expect that training in archaeology would focus on CRM. Surprisingly, that is not the case. Most PhD programs are still organized to train academic archaeologists with little regard for the skills demanded by CRM jobs. Thus, most graduates are retrained on-the-job to conduct CRM services. In the 1970s, the first CRM-focused MA programs were established. The number has grown slowly, with the supply of MA archaeologists still below industry needs.

The Next Decade

The current attacks on archaeology are likely to have greater long-term impacts on university programs than on CRM. Research funding for archaeology from the NSF and other federal sources may eventually be restored but will likely take years. Thus, the already-competitive environment for academic research funding will become even more cutthroat. Training will also have to change. Teaching and research assistantships that support PhD students largely depend on undergraduate enrollments and grant funding, respectively. With anthropology enrollments declining and grant funding slashed, the number of students in PhD programs will decline. Professional MA programs, which rely on students paying full tuition, will increasingly depend on CRM companies and organizations subsidizing their employees' education.

Thus far, attacks on CRM have focused on the reach and extent of executive power. The administration delayed allocating congressionally appropriated money for the Historic Preservation Fund (HPF) in FY 2025 and has proposed slashing the HPF further in FY 2026. Select federal archaeologists have been fired, and more positions are threatened. National emergencies have been declared that waive or limit environmental reviews, and select CRM contracts have been canceled. These actions demonstrate a

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callous disregard for historic preservation. But they do not represent a frontal attack on existing historic preservation laws, and to date there has been no attempt to change these laws.

In the current political environment, it is easy to ignore that CRM practice faces an even greater challenge. Years of scrutiny and litigation has transformed CRM archaeology from an applied science into a descriptive service. While current attacks may not alter the underlying laws, they could push CRM further in this direction, greatly limiting future scientific contributions of CRM archaeology.

The Future of American Archaeology

For decades, American archaeology has limped along with universities training academic archaeologists, most of whom are then reoriented to perform increasingly descriptive CRM services. The system, which should have been reformed years ago, is untenable. American archaeology—in both the academic and CRM sectors—needs to embrace its public mandate to help preserve, protect, and explain the history of places of importance to the American people and to enhance scientific understandings of the long-term behavioral and cultural processes that archaeology is uniquely suited to investigate. On the industry side, the orientation of CRM archaeology needs to shift emphasis from systematically documenting the archaeological record to exploring the past by marrying scientific and evidence-based research with heritage values cherished by local, descendant, and Indigenous communities. Academic research should welcome its role to analyze and synthesize the vast amounts of information already collected by CRM. Archaeological training needs to prepare students for the ethical challenges inherent in pursuing

science in a for-profit environment, for designing research that accounts for other views of the past, and for practicing collaborative approaches for engaging interested communities.

American archaeology will survive, but its nature and character will change. The discipline can continue to follow the current downward trajectory to insignificance, or it can become an integrated, largely applied, discipline. The latter requires CRM to embrace its public responsibility to protect heritage resources and to advance collaborative, scientific understandings of human societies, while academic archaeology thoroughly responds to the opportunities provided by CRM and to the demands of CRM practice.

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