

Historical Archaeology of Religious Sites and Cemeteries

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Historical Archaeology of Religious Sites and Cemeteries

Although historical archaeology traces its roots back to the late-18th century with the pioneering excavations of Robert Pagan and his work relocating the site of Samuel de Champlain's 1604 settlement on St. Croix Island, today's professional organizations only began to come together in the 1960s (Cotter 1994:16–17). In 1960, Stanley South (1994:viii) founded the Conference on Historic Sites Archaeology to provide a venue for historical archaeologists to share their research and concerns. Slightly later, in 1966, the Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology convened at Bear Mountain, New York. The following year, a group of like-minded individuals gathered in Dallas, Texas, to found The Society for Historical Archaeology. Perhaps not coincidentally, the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 legislated the archaeological study of historic sites nationwide. Several seminal books also shaped the practice and development of historical archaeology in the 1970s, including Ivor Noël Hume's (1972) *Historical Archaeology*; South's (1977) *Method and Theory in Historical Archaeology*; Robert Schuyler's (1978) *Historical Archaeology: A Guide to Substantive and Theoretical Contributions*; and, perhaps most significantly, James Deetz's (1977) *In Small Things Forgotten*. For all intents and purposes, the foundations of modern professional historical archaeology were laid in the 1960s and 1970s.

In preparing this edited volume on the archaeology of religious sites and cemeteries, we as editors were interested in determining the degree of attention paid by historical archaeologists to two interrelated topics: religious sites and gravemarkers. Three of the four seminal volumes listed above discussed these issues.

Noël Hume (1972:157–160) explicitly discussed the excavation of burials, while Deetz (1977) devoted the fourth chapter of his book to the analysis of mortuary art in colonial New England and its relationship to changing religious beliefs. An important article by Deetz and colleague Edwin Dethlefsen (1967), entitled “Death's Head, Cherub, Urn and Willow,” was also reprinted in Schuyler's edited volume (1978:83–90). Based on this and a more general review of the literature, it seemed that religious places, sacred sites, and cemeteries had long been minor chords in North American historical archaeology.

In what might be termed the pioneering days of the field, long before The Society for Historical Archaeology existed, researchers did excavate religious sites on occasion. These excavations include the early studies of Sainte Marie 1 by Father Felix Martin in 1855 (Kidd 1994:53); Mary Jeffrey Galt's excavations at the Jamestown Church in 1897 (Noël Hume 1996:111); and J. O. Brew's (1994:27–47) work at the mission churches at Awatovi Pueblo in Arizona in the 1930s. During the early and mid-20th century, numerous excavations were undertaken at missions in the Southwest and Alta California (Cordell 1992:33; Costello and Hornbeck 1992:321; Hester 1992:191–211). Even Deetz (1978) was interested in investigating mission sites with his work at La Purisima Mission in California. Later, archaeologists branched out from their studies of western missions and examined East Coast Spanish missions in Florida and Georgia (McEwan 1993; Thomas 1993).

Analysis of religious sites was not restricted to Spanish missions. Archaeologists have analyzed Mormon sites, including early work at Nauvoo, the Mormon temple in Illinois (Green and Bowles 1964), and the Mormon Temple in Washington, DC (Leone 1977). Mark Leone (1973) even looked at how Mormon ideology and religious teachings impacted the way Mormons laid out their towns. Historical archaeologists have also studied communal religious societies such as the Harmony Society and the Shakers (Starbuck 1984, 1990; De Cunzo et al. 1996).

The study of gravestones following Deetz and Dethlefsen's (1967) seminal work has not been

restricted to archaeological work on colonial cemeteries in New England. Within 10 years of Deetz's (1977) seminal work, archaeologists tested his theories to see if the iconography on gravestones was tied to a region (New England) or a particular religion (Puritan). The same patterns appeared in New York City Anglican and Dutch Reformed cemeteries, suggesting broader cultural trends (Baugher and Winter 1983). Gaynell Stone (1978, 1987) found additional decorative styles, evidence of regional trade networks, and links between ethnicity and gravestone choice on Long Island. Other archaeologists working in South Carolina (Gorman and DiBlasi 1976) and in Florida (Dethlefsen and Jensen 1977) found regional variations in gravestone iconography patterns in the South. Schuyler (1982) found western regional diversity in his study of vernacular gravemarkers in Utah. Researchers in Ireland and Scotland also examined historic cemeteries and found some images

that were different from those that Deetz found in New England (King 1985; Willsher 1985).

A year-by-year review of the journals *Historical Archaeology* and *Northeast Historical Archaeology* reveals that, despite this early foreshadowing, the archaeology of religious sites and mortuary art has, until recently, seen only limited attention from historical archaeologists. In 38 years of publication, between 1967 and 2003, *Historical Archaeology* published 786 articles (Table 1). Of these, only 16 articles (2%) deal specifically with sacred sites, and only 29 articles (3.7%) focus on cemeteries or gravemarkers. Of the latter, the vast majority of the articles deal with methodological concerns such as the excavation and recording of historic cemeteries. Other articles focus on forensic anthropology. Fewer pieces discuss the interpretation of cultural trends as reflected through gravemarkers (Table 1). In fact, in many years no articles appeared on any of the

TABLE 1
HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY: ARTICLES ON SACRED SITES AND CEMETERIES 1967–2003

Year	No. of Articles	Sacred Sites	Cemeteries/Gravemarkers
1967	22	1	1
1968	8	0	0
1969	8	0	0
1970	9	0	0
1971	11	0	0
1972	7	1	0
1973	10	1	0
1974	8	1	0
1975	7	0	0
1976	11	1-Jesuit rings	0
1977	12	0	0
1978	7	0	0
1979	6	0	0
1980	6	0	0
1981	10	1-Witchcraft petroglyphs	
1982	1-East Liverpool P.	0	0
1983	16	0	0
1984	17	0	0
1985	16	1-MH Church	0
1986	15	0	0
1987	13	1-Burials from Presidio Chapel	0
1988	18	0	0
1989	16	0	0
1990	35		2-Coffins and resistivity
1991	30	0	1
1992	45	2-Missions	0
1993	32	0	1-Geophysics

TABLE 1 (CONTINUED)
HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY: ARTICLES ON SACRED SITES AND CEMETERIES 1967–2003

Year	No. of Articles	Sacred Sites	Cemeteries/Gravemarkers
1994	24		4-Moravians, slave cemetery, RI Cem, Texas grave
1995	19	1-Mission arch.	1-Prone slave burial
1996	33	2-Af. Am religion	1-Cem. St. Mary's City, 1-Tombs Venezuela
1997	31	2	2
1998	33	0	0
1999	30	0	0
2000	42	0	0
2001	38	0	10-Forensic volume
2002	37	0	1-NW Coast mort.
2003	35	0	1-Cem GPR recording
2004	39	1-Af. Am. rituals	1-Af. Am. bur. grnd.
2005	29	0	2-Wampanoag bur. grnd., 19th-c. cem.
TOTAL	786	16 (2%)	29 (3.7%)

aforementioned topics: cemeteries, gravemarkers, or sacred places. It is only since the 1990s that this pattern has started to change.

A review of *Northeast Historical Archaeology* shows a parallel trend. Out of 203 articles published in the history of that journal, a mere 10 deal with religious sites (Table 2). In 33 years, only 4.9% of the articles are on religious sites. Most of these articles are on gravemarkers, thanks in large part to the work of Elizabeth Crowell (1981; Crowell and Mackie 1984) and a handful of other scholars interested in commemoration (Bell 1996; Garman 1996; Robinson 1996). The question remains, why were so few individuals publishing on religious sites and cemeteries (other than forensic anthropological studies) in the leading journals in the field? There is no reason to believe that the relative absence of these topics reflects a bias on the part of the journals' editors or editorial staffs. One possibility is that archaeologists were publishing on these topics but in alternative venues. Since 1983, the Association for Gravestone Studies has published *Markers*, a lavishly illustrated annual journal where articles by historical archaeologists have appeared (Veit 1995, 1999; Gradwohl 1997, 1998, 2003). Cultural geographers often subscribe to the Pioneer America Society. Its publications, particularly the journal *Material Culture*, have included a significant number of articles on houses of

worship and cemeteries, some of which are written by historical archaeologists (Stone 1991). Moreover, the gray literature is full of reports on cemetery excavations (particularly, Bell 1994). Nevertheless, compared to studies of other classes of sites such as military, domestic, plantation, or industrial, sacred places seem underrepresented in the major journals in the field. Similarly, ceramics, glass, and other artifact categories are much better represented than gravemarkers.

The reasons for the comparative dearth of archaeological studies of religious sites are fourfold. First, churches and religious organizations in general have always been bastions of literacy, having been the harbingers of education and the written word even during the scholarly decline of the Dark Ages. The existence of written records associated with a structure or organization usually provides substantial evidence regarding the temporal and spatial aspects of a site and the activities of those who used the site. As a result, some researchers have mistakenly believed that all possible information about a particular congregation is already known and all that remains is to reanalyze the existing written record.

Second, religious structures, for the most part, are rarely in danger of impact from modern development. Renovations and additions are usually undertaken with private funds, precluding any legally mandated cultural resource surveys.

TABLE 2
 NORTHEAST HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY: ARTICLES ON SACRED SITES AND CEMETERIES
 1971–2004

Year	No. of Articles	Sacred Sites	Cemeteries/Gravemarkers
1971	15	0	0
1972	6	0	0
1973	0	0	0
1974	7	0	0
1975	8	0	0
1976	7	0	0
1977	7	0	0
1978–1980	6	0	0
1981	6	0	1
1982	4	0	0
1983	9	0	0
1984	5	0	1
1985	5	0	0
1986	2	0	0
1987	6	0	0
1988	5	0	1?
1989	6	0	1
1990	4	0	0
1991	6	0	1
1992–1993	14	0	0
1994	5	0	0
1995	6	0	1
1996	11	0	3
1998	9	1	0
1999	6	0	0
2000	6	0	0
2001–2002	14	0	0
2003	9	0	0
2004	9	0	1
Total	203	1 (0.49%)	10 (4.9%)

Further, religious structures and cemeteries are generally not considered eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, except under special circumstances (Little et al. 1993:16).

Third, some archaeologists simply believe churches are unproductive archaeological sites and contribute little to understanding the past. As late as 1978, one British archaeologist argued (in Rodwell 1981:35), “Churches are particularly unedifying as archaeological sites: the structural sequence is difficult to read and usually impossible to date ... artifacts are rare, and the only biological deposits susceptible to analysis are generally those of human bones.” As numerous studies, including the ones in this volume, have and are demonstrating (Rodwell

1981; Scharfenberger 2000), this viewpoint is categorically false.

Fourth, and perhaps most insidious, is the lack of interest on the part of many archaeologists to investigate the spiritual aspect of past cultures, both ideologically and materially. This attitude can be attributed in part to the positivist notion associated with “new archaeology” that only data that are objectively quantifiable and result in laws that transcend time, space, and culture are worthy of investigation (Trigger 1989; Willey and Sabloff 1993). Aspects of the human condition such as religious beliefs and symbolism, aesthetic sensibilities, and scientific knowledge are given little credence (Trigger 1989:327). Moreover, the lingering

effects of Marxist theory on the discipline, with its emphasis on materialism and general denigration of religion as a social factor, has resulted in a prevailing avoidance of religious sites by archaeologists. Yet some researchers, such as V. G. Childe, believe that the spiritual aspects of a society can be as visible in the archaeological records as other aspects, such as technology (Trigger 1989:262).

It is hypothesized here that the reason for the relatively low visibility of these topics is not simply the availability of alternative publishing venues but, rather, the history of the field and, in particular, the theoretical perspectives that were popular in the 1970s and 1980s, which were often drawn from Marxist or cultural materialist perspectives. Although these important viewpoints have not disappeared and are unlikely to do so, a variety of alternative voices are being heard today, thanks to the rise of the postprocessual movement. Recent issues of *Historical Archaeology* have included articles on tombs in colonial Venezuela (Zucchi 1997:31–42), African American spirituality (Rotman and Nassaney 1997:63–81; Wilkie 1997:81–106), and African American grave markers (Garman 1996:74–94). While the historical archaeology of sacred spaces and memorialization/commemoration are minor themes, they are clearly growing in importance.

The power and importance of religion in the colonies prior to the American Revolution cannot be overstated. The appearance of preachers with great oratory skills could draw hundreds, if not thousands, of people. Debates among preachers of different denominations aroused particular interest. Similarly, sermons, catechisms, and various theological treatises accounted for the majority of published material up to the revolution (Bonomi 1986:3–4). Religion was an integral part of colonial life, oftentimes being the only respite in an otherwise dismal existence on the frontier. Houses of worship, in addition to holding religious services, also hosted legal, civil, and social gatherings (Earle 1891:192)—the continuation of a practice in place in pre-Reformation Europe (Howard 1995:168). Meetinghouses were even conduits of information during the revolution, acting as dissemination points of news from the war front to those at home (Scharfenberger, this volume).

The 19th century brought a renewed interest in spirituality. New sects grew with religious

leaders who were charismatic and inspired large followings, such as Joseph Smith and Brigham Young of the Mormons. Communal/utopian sects grew and expanded such as the Shakers, which was founded in 1774 but had its major growth in the 19th century, and the Harmony Society and its communities in New Harmony, Indiana, and Economy, Pennsylvania (De Cunzio et al. 1996; Starbuck 2004). The 19th century also saw the dramatic growth of African American churches, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Religion was a binding force in communities and, for better or worse, dramatically impacted people's lives.

The archaeological excavation of church sites, especially the basements and yards, reveals not only information about a building's construction but also about the social activities taking place within a church. Some archaeological data could ultimately shed light on changing values within a congregation. Closely linked to the study of churches is the analysis of associated cemeteries and their above- and belowground burial practices. While large, nonsectarian 19th-century rural cemeteries such as Mt. Auburn in Boston or Greenwood in Brooklyn are not linked to religious institutions, most colonial and early-19th-century burial grounds do have a direct affiliation with a particular religion.

The cemetery case studies used in this thematic volume are all associated with religious institutions and are linked to the study of religious sites. This volume starts with case studies of church sites (Scharfenberger; Ward and McCarthy; Baugher) and then moves to burials associated with church sites (Lawrence; Riordan; Lawrence, Schopp, and Lore). From the belowground study of burying places, the articles move to the aboveground study of grave markers (Veit; Stone; Mytum). While the articles fit into three broad categories, there is considerable overlap in the analyses and findings from these case studies.

Gerard Scharfenberger's article provides an overview to the study of church sites. He examines the history and religious practices of Baptist settlers in colonial Monmouth County, New Jersey. Evidence for a variety of extracurricular activities, as well as religious practices, was found in archaeological excavations at the Holmdel Baptist Church, highlighting the potential of religious sites to inform researchers about aspects of everyday life.

In terms of architecture, the first Holmdel Baptist Church was smaller than the current church. Over time, the colonial church was enlarged, and Scharfenberger tried to determine if there was archaeological evidence of the church's original footprint. He also found that changes in the church's architecture and interior design reflected a movement away from earlier austere practices—for example, using a baptismal font instead of the local stream for baptismal services and installing stained glass windows over the earlier plain, clear windows.

In a similar vein, Jeanne Ward and John McCarthy's excavations at the Burlington Friends Meeting House, once a center of Quaker belief in the Delaware Valley, provide a glimpse into the unusual architecture of this house of worship. The challenge of determining if an earlier structure existed on the site faced Ward and McCarthy during their excavations at the Burlington Friend's Meeting House. They did uncover the footprint of the 1687 hexagonal meetinghouse, and the Quakers' value of simplicity is reflected in the building's architecture.

Ward and McCarthy examined the 18th-century material discarded at the meeting house site and found that the artifacts also reflected this value of simplicity. The use of unadorned ceramics by the Friends (with meals provided by the parishioners) reflected the avoidance of ostentatious displays of wealth. These plain ceramics stand in sharp contrast to the transfer-printed dishes and elegant black basalt teapot that Scharfenberger found at Holmdel Baptist Church. Stone's (this volume) analysis of the simplicity of Quaker gravestones also supports Ward and McCarthy's contention that Quaker values are reflected in their material culture. In fact, some Long Island Quaker congregations removed all the gravestones in 1776 and let the burials go unmarked.

Ward and McCarthy, Scharfenberger, and Sherene Baugher's articles reveal the social activities that occurred within the churches, including church dinners. Baugher excavated mid-19th-century deposits at a Methodist church near Wall Street in New York City. She found evidence of meals served in the church, not unusual in the 19th century; however, evidence of clay smoking pipes and alcoholic beverages was a surprise in a church that disapproved of these practices. Baugher provides numerous examples of the occurrence of "prohibited

behavior" at other church sites. Scharfenberger also found evidence of whiskey and beer bottles in the basement of the Holmdel Baptist Church, which was ironic because the congregation was active in the temperance movement. Baugher and Scharfenberger both note discrepancies between proscribed behavior and actual practices within individual congregations.

Not all burials are within cemeteries. At the John Street Methodist Church, construction workers found human bones inside the church basement. The bones may have been from Native American or European American burials, and one of the goals of the study was to analyze these burials. Baugher's article highlights how even historical archaeologists have to address concerns of repatriation, reburial, and protection of sacred sites. The project involved religious leaders from the Native American community and the Methodist church, all working with archaeologists to determine the way the bones, any burials, and the site would be handled.

Baugher was not the only archaeologist who had to deal with burials within a church. John Lawrence examined burials within a Catholic church and a cemetery next to the church in Nicoya, Guancastee, in Costa Rica. Both Baugher and Lawrence address whether the bones reflect precontact burials prior to the construction of the churches. In an attempt to determine the religious affiliation of the people buried within the church and in the cemetery, Lawrence analyzed the burial characteristics to determine whether they reflected Native American beliefs, Spanish Catholic practices, or a combination of Spanish Catholic and native symbols.

Using archaeological techniques, Lawrence also tested a model of cultural dominance by the Spanish over Native American societies, which was originally developed in the high culture areas of Latin America. According to various beliefs, the church of Nicoya was built on the site of a small temple, but Lawrence did not find evidence of a precontact Native American site buried under the church or in the town. Nor did he find evidence that the extant church was the famous colonial church (in fact, the footprint of the colonial church was inside the present church), raising the problems that arise when archaeological data conflict with oral traditions. These issues are also discussed in Lawrence's article.

Timothy Riordan has been involved in a long-term excavation of the Catholic church and cemetery at colonial St. Mary's City, the original capital of Maryland. Burials, including three lead coffins, were found within the church (Miller et al. 2004). Riordan found 57 additional burials (1638–1730) surrounding the footprint of the 17th-century building. He analyzed the similarities and differences in Catholic and Protestant burial practices in England and in 17th-century Maryland. Riordan investigated changes in the use and construction of coffins, the use of shroud pins, and the ways hands of the dead were placed. He demonstrates that archaeological data can provide valuable information on burial rituals and ethnicity.

Riordan compared Spanish and French Catholic burial practices with English Protestant burials practices of the 17th- and early-18th centuries. He questioned whether religion or ethnicity would have a greater impact on colonial Catholic burials in St. Mary's City. Interestingly, Riordan finds that the Maryland Catholic burials reflected the larger trends in English Protestant burial practices, even though these colonists were able to practice their Catholic religion without persecution.

John Lawrence, Paul Schopp, and Robert Lore studied burial practices in 18th-century New Jersey. They discuss the collapse and dissolution of an 18th-century German-American Lutheran congregation using documents to show how claims of poor preaching, charges of witchcraft, and the soul searching of the congregants may have affected the cohesion of the congregation. They then analyzed the cemetery to see whether burial practices could demonstrate the transformation of a congregation with a very strong group orientation (where community well being is more important than the welfare of the individual) to one focused on the individual or individual family unit. Their analysis suggests that the oldest burials reflect a group orientation (*Gemeinschaft*), whereas the later burials reflect a focus on the individual or the individual family groupings (*Geschellschaft*). They suggest that this dramatic change in the placement of the dead provides material evidence of the strains and social breakdown of this Lutheran congregation.

In examining burial practices and religious beliefs, researchers should also evaluate the aboveground archaeological evidence—the

gravestones. Richard Veit's broad theoretical overview of the archaeology of gravestone studies provides the theoretical background for the three cemetery papers. The articles by Veit, Stone, and Harold Mytum examine gravemarkers and build on the foundation laid by Deetz and Dethlefsen. Veit and Stone also expand on the seriation studies of Deetz and Dethlefsen, finding new patterns.

Veit examined five cemeteries (Presbyterian, Anglican, and Baptist) and 934 stones from 1680–1830. He found death's heads along with other mortality images such as hourglasses and crossed bones. In addition to cherubs, he also found images that were associated with age and gender. For example, the shell motif was found on the tombstones of children, aged two to five years old, the tulip marker was found on the gravestones of unmarried women and girls, and occasionally swords and Masonic symbols were found on men's gravestones.

Veit notes that urn and willow markers were rare in colonial New Jersey. Instead of this motif, Veit found monogrammed markers. He makes a strong case to tie these designs to the burgeoning consumerism of late-18th-century America rather than to changes within religious ideology. He connects the monogram designs to the neoclassical styles that were popular with the citizens in the new nation. Veit provides ample examples of late-18th-century advertising on the gravestones with the carvers' name and sometimes shop location incised on the tympanum of the headstone or at the grass line on the marker's face. His article challenges researchers to look for more complex information and broader cultural patterns in gravestones.

Stone's article builds on data from her dissertation (1987) and looks at the southern periphery of the New England cultural zone. Working on Long Island (including Brooklyn and Queens), she examined 164 colonial cemeteries and amassed an enormous body of data from 4,300 stones. Her database includes gravestone shape, text, iconography, and material (type of stone and whether it was local or imported). Her study is probably the largest and most comprehensive examination of colonial gravestones. The Long Island cemeteries represent Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists, Dutch Reformed, Lutherans, Methodists, Quakers, and Presbyterians. The gravestones primarily reflect English and Dutch

ethnicity, with a few African stones surviving on the eastern end of Long Island. Stone also notes the lack of extant colonial markers for Native Americans, even though there were survivors at that time (many of them servants and some enslaved). She analyzed the various factors influencing gravemarker selection: religion, ethnicity, trade routes, and kinship ties. Stone's article also forces archaeologists to think beyond the more streamlined "Deetzian" interpretation of gravestones.

On the issue of iconography, Mytum brings a European perspective. His work investigates the iconography employed in 17th- and 18th-century Irish Protestant and Catholic burial grounds in West Ulster, Ireland. He discusses the political, social, and religious tensions that existed between the Protestant and Catholic communities. Mytum acknowledges that class, status, gender, ethnicity, and occupation are all components of individual identity; however, he notes that religion was the most crucial factor in defining a person's identity in Northern Ireland. His article explores how these religious differences (Catholic and Protestant) are reflected in the gravestones. Here, as in the colonies, mortality images abound. There were some clearly 18th-century Catholic symbols such as the cross (then regarded as a Papist symbol) and the use of "IHS" found in the cemeteries. Mytum discusses how some symbols, such as skulls and crossbones, were used by both Catholics and Protestants and could carry very different religious messages for the living. For Protestants the skull and crossbones signified the brevity of life. For Catholics these symbols encouraged prayer for the departed (in order to decrease the time the person's soul spent in purgatory). Mytum notes that Catholics believed the living could impact the fate of the deceased through prayer; whereas the soul's fate was determined at death for Protestants. Mytum explains that the death's heads and crossbones were symbols used to propel Catholics into action—active prayer—rather than to remind them of life's brevity. Mytum's article stresses the need for archaeologists to understand the complex and perhaps diverse meanings of symbols on gravestones.

The articles in this volume cover a range of archaeological projects, including university field schools, joint endeavors between archaeologists and volunteers, partnerships

between archaeologists and community members including descent groups, museum-sponsored excavations, and cultural resource management projects. For example, Baugher discusses how archaeologists and members of the American Indian Community House successfully worked together to excavate the John Street Methodist Church. Lawrence, Schopp, and Lore demonstrate that a wealth of religious and forensic data can be revealed by CRM work. Scharfenberger and Ward both worked with many volunteers on their projects. Veit, Stone, and Mytum had dedicated students and volunteers working with them. When it comes to revealing the interrelationships between religion and culture in past societies, cemeteries and places of worship have much to offer researchers who are examining questions of ethnicity, class, status, trade networks, or consumerism.

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