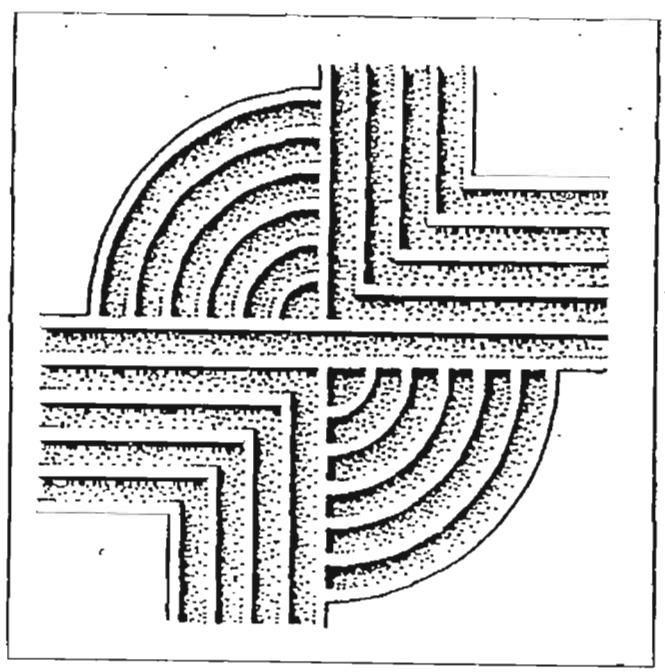
METAL DETECTORS, BOTTLE COLLECTORS, AND OTHER THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT



RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION 31

METAL DETECTORS, BOTTLE COLLECTORS, AND OTHER THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

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Archaeologists, and those interested in archaeology, frequently talk about the subject of their study being "non-renewable," part of our nation's cultural heritage, and needing preservation for future generations. And yet, many of us find it difficult to address candidly the question of site destruction by bottle collectors, metal detector enthusiasts, and others. A few of us are even hard pressed to defend the needs for and goals of archaeological preservation. Before I go on, please allow me to emphasize that I am not talking about the practice of surface collecting, particularly if it is coupled with site recordation.

It seems clear that the threats to America's archaeological resources are at an all-time high. Not only does continued economic growth jeopardize the past, but those who want to possess a part of that history seem to be both more numerous and more active. On a national level, the National Park Service has recognized this problem, creating the LOOT Clearinghouse, an acronym for "Listing of Outlaw Treachery." In response to an alarming increase in vandalism and looting at federal archaeological properties, the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, in conjunction with the National Park Service, has developed a course entitled, "Archaeological Protection Training for Cultural Resources and Law Enforcement Managers and Specialists." Several federal agencies have co-sponsored an international symposium on site vandalism this past year. The disgraceful looting of human burials at the Slack Farm site in Kentucky received national attention as a grand jury issued indictments for ten individuals. The first conviction under ARPA was obtained last year, and the Society for American Archaeology has launched its own anti-looting project which involves a plenary session in 1989 and a traveling exhibit.

Here in South Carolina archaeological looting and site vandalism is a real and constant problem. A major Civil War campsite in the Charleston area was heavily vandalized by individuals searching for bottles, buckles, and other collectibles. A colonial period site in Mount Pleasant, being professionally investigated as part of a compliance project, was almost destroyed by a weekend looter. Bottle collectors in Charleston routinely "dig" privies, destroying untold archaeological evidence. In Beaufort, the ETV channel has shown episodes of a program entitled "The Treasure Hunter," where collectors use a metal detector to search and dig for "relics" in church yards and historic sites. In Columbia the NBC affiliate hosted "relic collectors" glorifying their "hobby" on a morning talk show. Newspaper articles and columns have on several occasions favorably spot-lighted "relic collectors" and their "hobby." In Charleston a glossy tourist magazine featured an

article which extolled the thrill of digging privies for "unique" bottles and other artifacts. Elsewhere in the state prehistoric sites are robbed of burials and grave goods. The fact that shrubbery is given more legal protection in South Carolina than are her irreplaceable cultural resources underscores that our state offers archaeological remains virtually no protection from wanton looting.

However widespread site vandalism is in South Carolina, much of the blame must be directed to the professional community. Too often professional archaeologists choose to ignore the looting, rather than to confront the problems of bottle collectors, metal detectors, and pothunters. Some of us have the attitude that, if ignored, the problem will go away. What we are seeing is that the problem doesn't go away, it simply gets worse. Some of us believe that "reformation" is incompatible with a strong, vocal stand against site vandalism. It is not -- archaeological site vandalism must be confronted through education, strong laws, and clear ethical statements. Some of us are simply too busy, too deeply buried in our research, compliance studies, and science, to become involved in such mundane matters. And some of us, truly and honestly, simply do not understand the seriousness of the problem and the extent of site looting.

The glorification of archaeological site looting can be found all around us. A children's book, entitled Treasure Hunting, published in 1980 by Silver Burdett and sold for only $1.99, justifies the use of metal detectors to hunt for relics and explains how to go about digging. The introduction states, in part,

> [b]eautiful coloured bottles, potlids, and clay pipes lie buried where they were thrown away on Victorian rubbish dumps. With a few tools and a little knowledge about where to look, you can begin to find these treasures from the past.

While the book cautions not to dig on "official archaeological sites" the looting of "unofficial" sites is apparently acceptable and while the thrill of history is loudly proclaimed, the author seemingly fails to recognize both the goals of archaeology and the destruction that "treasure hunting" causes.

For adult readers undertaking the renovation of their old house, perhaps in Charleston, a book called The Old-House Doctor, published in 1986 by Overlook Press, explains why the new owner should undertake "archaeological digging." The reasons for digging are simple according to the author: "(1) It's an exciting and enjoyable pastime; (2) You might unearth a pot of gold coins, a heap of rare bottles, or other valuable artifacts; and (3) You're sure to learn many fascinating details about the history and personality of your old-house . . . ." Again, the thrill of

discovery and ownership of the past is stressed. This publication offers a "how-to" approach on archaeology, much as it offers a "how-to" on replacing plumbing. There is no recognition of the destruction to the archaeological record that will result, or that this evidence of the past is more than just curious "relics."

Turning to the professional metal detector users, magazines such as Treasure and Western and Eastern Treasures (subtitled, "The Favorite Family Outdoor Sports Magazine") are widely available and offer clear instructions on looting archaeological sites. In one issue alone, articles included:

> "Finding Those Rare Relics," which stressed that good sites still exist and that "trench holes" should be refilled. One illustration was of a handgun recovered from the Antietam battlefield.
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> "Three B's in Civil War Country," which describes a pilgrimage from New Jersey down to Virginia in order to dig up Civil War sites. At one site the author describes digging a "three foot deep 'fire-pit' hole."
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> "Pssst! Wanna Be A Relic Collector," in which the author encourages relic collectors to use research materials in order to find choice items. The author states, "many fantastic relics are being found by those relic hunters who find, dig, and sift these sites. You may find a 4-5' probe a help in determining some of these sites" although it will "take months to put a dent in the relics on even a medium-sized virgin site."
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> "How to Find New Sites The Way Archaeologists Do," which needs no further description.
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> "E-- F-- - Profile of a Relic Collector," describes how this individual found his best site by noticing "a New York State historical marker on the side of the road." He states, "I worked that site for four years, not only using a metal detector, but excavating and sifting the soil surrounding the remains of six blockhouses. Today the results of those four years form the core of artifacts in a very extensive collection."

The attitude of these relic collectors toward historic preservation is clearly shown in their appeal to help gut the Archaeological Resource Protection Act of 1979. These individuals are attempting to raise over $13,000 to lobby congress to get "Federal and State land opened to you, the hobbyist." The ad bemoans the fact that, "every day more and more land is being closed to detecting because of this Act." Another article stated, "The injustices perpetrated upon the treasure hunter by

misrepresenting the Archaeological Protection Act of 1979 must stop . . . ."

In addition, the Federation of Metal Detector and Archaeological Clubs, Inc. lobbied for the defeat of Senate Bill 858, better known as the Abandoned Shipwrecks Act. Their position was simply stated, "The private sector needs the incentive for searching for wreck sites. . . ."

These few examples provide a clear view of "relic" or "treasure" hunters. In virtually every case the "thrill" of the hunt is emphasized, as is the possession of a part of history. In no article was the importance or meaning of these "relics" to the larger picture of lifeways reconstruction recognized. What was stressed in the articles were ways of finding more sites and more intensively "collecting" them. Lip service is paid to obtaining the owner's permission, although one author added the caveat, "if possible." The articles also reveal the extensive damage done by these individuals to the fragile cultural heritage of the United States.

Faced with this overwhelming evidence, what is the appropriate response by those of us who are concerned with history and preservation of cultural resources? From my perspective there are six essential, integrated aspects of our response.

First, we must be convinced that this history is worth saving. This necessitates that we step back from our research designs and compliance studies, and clearly realize that our ultimate goal must be making history understandable, interesting, and worthwhile to the public. It is clear, from sources such as Archaeology Magazine, National Geographic, and other popular literature, that the public is tremendously interested in archaeology. But the public is often stymied by obtuse, uninteresting, and poorly presented professional approaches to the study of the past. We must emphasize more strongly that archaeological sites, as evidence of past lifeways, belong to all people and that the conversion of this common heritage to private ownership steals from us all. The past is one of the few things that all citizens share in common. This must be an important cornerstone of our approach.

Second, there are too many times when archaeological reports are not even distributed to our colleagues, much less the public. Occasionally, reports are not even written. If we are going to call what we do, "public" archaeology, then it must be made accessible to the public, and accessible does not mean three or four copies of a report buried away at governmental or private repositories. Public means available through libraries, such as county public libraries and state libraries. It also means producing reports that are interesting and useful not only to

other professionals, but also to lay audiences. I should emphasize that I am not talking about simply massive research undertakings, but also survey reports conducted for developers as a requirement for compliance with public laws. In addition, these reports, if they are in the form of brochures or pamphlets (and there should be many more of these being produced), should be made widely available through libraries, museums, and schools.

Third, we must engage in a more active educational campaign, beginning with the schools, which offers alternatives to "relic collecting" and which explains, clearly and simply, why this activity destroys our past. Certainly we all realize that a child's early years are formative. If a child is never told that digging holes to look for "arrow heads" and "relics" is destructive then who is to blame -- the child grown up as a relic collector, or the preservation community which never got around to education.

Fourth, it is essential that the collecting of archaeological materials by professional archaeologists be recognized as inconsistent with preservation goals. I am aware of at least one situation where a professional archaeologist purchased an artifact, with privy soil still adhering, from an antique store for a personal collection, believing that this was consistent with some sort of preservation philosophy. It is not since it can destroy public confidence and provides the appearance of impropriety.

Fifth, it is essential that laws be enacted protecting terrestrial sites from vandalism and looting. I believe that more than just archaeological and historical sites on state owned property should be offered protection. There should be effective laws offering the private owner a recourse when an archaeological site on his property is damaged by "relic collectors." It is not even necessary to create a new section of law, since Section 16-11-610 of the South Carolina Code of Laws, which currently covers "Entry on Another's Land for Various Purposes Without Permission," could be easily modified to include archaeological remains.

Sixth, those of us interested in the preservation of the past must be willing to take a strong and unequivocal stand against site vandalism. This is not the place or time for "situational ethics." As James Agee said,

> I would suppose that nothing is necessarily wrong with compromise of itself, except that those who are easy enough to make it are easy enough to relax into it and accept it, and that it thus inevitably becomes fatal. Or more nearly, the essence of the trouble is that compromise is held to a virtue of itself.

The preservation of the past and the protection of our State's heritage are issues on which we must not compromise. We must be vigilant for articles, television shows, and public presentations which promote a careless disregard for the past. We must be willing to take time from our research or compliance studies in order to write letters to magazine editors, newspaper editors, television producers, and others to explain why "relic collecting" destroys the past which belongs to us all. Taking a stand against site vandalism, metal detectors, privy hunting, and bottle collecting will frequently be difficult and may earn us some strong enemies, but if we truly believe that the past is worth saving, then we have no choice. We must also be willing to work in and support public education programs, including the dissemination of archaeological studies more widely.

Finally, it is not my intention to cast stones from the vantage point of a glass house. I doubt that there is a single one of us in this room today, and I certainly include myself, who has done all that they could or should have to help protect the past. As a consequence, my comments are directed to each person here today -- we all need to accept our personal responsibility to help protect the past.

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