

Careers for Historians: Archaeologists

By Beth Crist

History professionals dig up information about the past. Some dig by looking through documents, books, or museum artifacts. Archaeologists dig in the dirt for evidence of the past. If you are observant, energetic, patient, and curious about the past, you might enjoy a career as an archaeologist.

Both archaeologists and historians interpret the past, but they use different tools. Both use written records, oral history, and artifacts (items made or used by humans). Archaeologists search for artifacts and areas of past human activity that are buried. When historians study artifacts, they use those in museums, antique stores, or someone's house.

Before talking any more about what archaeologists do, there are some common misunderstandings to clear up. First, archaeologists study humans, not dinosaurs and other creatures that lived millions of years ago (paleontologists do that). Next, archaeology is rarely full of great adventure. Popular movies like the Indiana Jones series make archaeology look dangerous and daring. In reality archaeology is a careful, detailed process.



Scott Ashcraft works on an archaeological dig conducted by the U.S. Forest Service.

That said, let's focus on what archaeologists do. Archaeologists begin projects by studying the records of areas under investigation. They look at aerial photographs, examine previous archaeological studies, and read history books. They also conduct surveys to look for artifacts like stone tools and features such as house foundations. Sometimes they use tools such as ground-penetrating radar (radar waves pointed underground to map what's there) to see what's

underground without having to dig. All these steps pinpoint archaeological sites and help preserve remains. Archaeologists excavate carefully because digging can destroy information and sometimes artifacts. As they dig, they document every pit, soil level, and artifact.

Archaeology doesn't end outside. Archaeologists spend a lot of time in the laboratory analyzing what they find in the field. They date artifacts and examine them under a microscope, identify plant and animal remains, and compare artifacts with ones found at other sites. Then they form hypotheses, or explanations, about the past. From their discoveries, they answer questions such as When did the people live? What foods did they eat? What dwellings did they live in? and What work did they do?

A person with a bachelor's degree in anthropology can find work on archaeology digs and in archaeology labs. A master's degree in archaeology offers more opportunities and responsibilities in the field and lab. A person with a Ph.D. can teach in a university and oversee projects in the academic, public, or private realm.

Some archaeologists work with museum collections. Others specialize in investigative work, such as forensic anthropology (excavating, identifying, and interpreting human skeletons). Many archaeologists focus on specific geographical areas, such as Madagascar or the southeastern United States. Others concentrate on particular cultural groups, such as African Americans, or time periods, such as the Paleo-Indian period (before 8000 B.C.). Underwater archaeology is another specialty.

Archaeologists find jobs in universities, state and federal agencies, private consulting firms, museums, and historic sites. Wherever they work, archaeologists find fulfilling careers by preserving the past. Many archaeologists educate the public about the importance of preservation and help enforce laws protecting archaeological sites.

To learn more:

- Check out the following links to learn more about becoming an archaeologist:

Ask Dr. Dig

<http://www.digonsite.com/drldig/index.html>

Frequently Asked Questions about a Career in Archaeology in the U.S.

<http://www.museum.state.il.us/ismdepts/anthro/dlcfaq.html>

Careers in Historical Archaeology

<http://www.sha.org/Futures/careers.htm>

Anthropology Careers

<http://www.nku.edu/~anthro/careers.html>

Archaeology as a Career

<http://www.rla.unc.edu/lessons/Lesson/L501/L501.htm>

Archaeology and You

<http://www.saa.org/publications/ArchAndYou/>

- Arrange an interview with an archaeologist at a historic site, park, university, or government agency. Come prepared with a list of questions: What do you do on a typical day? What is your favorite part of the job? Why did you want to be an archaeologist? What is your educational background? What projects are you working on?
- Research specialties in which an archaeologist might work: zooarchaeology, archaeoastronomy, archaeobotany, etc. List the skills and education a person should have in order to work in that specialty (go to <http://archaeology.about.com/library/jobs/bljoblist.htm> for a starting place).

Try it out:

- Volunteer at an archaeological dig or lab. North Carolina's Office of State Archaeology and the Trading Path Preservation Association, for instance, have volunteer programs. Organizations in your area may have opportunities.
- Complete the activities at the following Web sites:

<http://ted.educ.sfu.ca/people/staff/jmd/archaeology/>

<http://www.history.org/history/argy/argykids.htm>

<http://www.rom.on.ca/digs/munsell/>

<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/archaeology/second/kids/kids.html>

http://observe.ivv.nasa.gov/nasa/exhibits/ubar/ubar_o.html

Interview with Scot Ashcraft

Scott Ashcraft works as an archaeologist for the United States Forest Service. Forest Service archaeologists perform many duties, including excavation, reconstruction of historic buildings, public education and interpretation, investigation (with law enforcement) of the theft and destruction of archaeological sites, and consultation with American Indians and other cultural groups.

Beth Crist: What is your educational background?

Scott Ashcraft: I attended J. T. Hoggard High School in Wilmington, where I grew up. I received a bachelor of science degree in geography with a minor in philosophy at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee. I completed

archaeological field school through the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and graduate courses in anthropology and heritage resources through Western Carolina University and the University of Nevada at Reno.

BC: When did you become interested in archaeology as a career?

SA: When I was growing up in Wilmington, we lived in the historic part of town, and I got my start in archaeology right in my backyard. One day while I was playing in the dirt of an old shed, I found an old coin. I tried to figure out how I could go through the dirt to look for more coins, and so I got my mother's spaghetti strainer and sifted through the dirt. What I found were several old marbles and coins. From those artifacts, I figured out that kids had played marbles in the shed one hundred years before I played there. I thought that was so neat. But my mother didn't think my sifting dirt through her spaghetti strainer was neat—I got into trouble! That experience had a lasting effect on me, and after that my hobbies always had something to do with history and archaeology.

Later in college, I was finishing my major in geography when I visited an archaeological excavation with a friend. The site was fascinating, and I knew then what I wanted to do.

BC: Have you had any other history-related jobs?

SA: At Western Carolina University I worked at an archeological site helping to remove soil and map the site. I also worked with artifacts in the lab. After college I worked in contract archaeology [archaeology projects conducted before construction begins, sometimes called salvage archaeology], traveling around the eastern United States to find or excavate archaeological sites.

BC: What do you do at work on a typical day?

SA: The duties I perform on a given day depend on what phase of a job I am in. If I am working in the field at a project site, my duties might include digging individual holes and looking for artifacts (surveying) or carefully digging excavation units. If the fieldwork has been done, I may be in the lab doing artifact analysis or research to complete a report detailing the findings. Because I work for a government agency, I have a lot of contact with the public, ranging from answering questions by phone to giving presentations to school or civic groups.

BC: What do you like best about your job?

SA: I enjoy the excitement of discovery and continuously learning something new about the past. In some ways, an archaeologist is like a detective who searches for clues to solve an ancient mystery. I get outdoors frequently and enjoy the variety of landscapes where archeological sites are located. One of my specialties is rock art, which generally comes in the form of petroglyphs (rock carvings) or pictographs (paintings on rocks). Western North Carolina has a great

variety of prehistoric and historic rock art, and each one is unique. In a way, people hundreds or thousands of years ago told stories through these carvings or paintings. Really, I like almost everything about my job.

BC: What advice do you have for students who are interested in becoming archaeologists?

SA: Sometimes students get advice suggesting they focus on careers that will offer them good job opportunities. This is good advice, but I recommend that they pursue their true interests and their dreams, whatever they may be. If you love what you do, finding a job within your specialty will not be a problem. If you are interested in becoming an archaeologist, plan to go to a college that has an anthropology/archaeology curriculum. And remember, there are different careers within the fields of anthropology and archaeology. Once you get to college, you can explore the area you like best and go for it.

BC: What has been your most exciting find or favorite project?

SA: That is a tough question because I have been on many interesting projects, including a variety of exciting finds. The first five sites I worked on were an 1,100-year-old American Indian village, a 500-year-old American Indian village, a colonial-era wharf and storefront, a group of 900-year-old American Indian shell mounds, and a 180-year-old cemetery in which Revolutionary War veterans were buried. Each site offers something new and exciting.

The photographs in this article are courtesy of the United States Forest Service.