

The Status of Northwest Historical Archaeology: An Analysis of Representation

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Abstract

Historic-period archaeological research comprises a substantial portion of the cultural resource management archaeology completed in the Northwest every year. How do we define historical archaeology in the Northwest? How much of our research is focused on historic-period archaeological sites? Does the archaeological community publish the results of historic-period archaeological research proportionally? Do cultural resource assessment background reviews and their resulting research designs identify diverse histories in the Northwest? This poster presents data on Northwest historical archaeology in presentations, publications, and cultural resource management literature to begin to evaluate the status of Northwest historical archaeology in cultural resource management.

Goals & Obstacles

The goal of this research was to establish how historical archaeology is defined in the Northwest, how much historical archaeology is done, and whether historical archaeology is proportionally represented in regional publications and presentations. The authors encountered some obstacles in not being able to compare site data from Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and British Columbia because of differences in database management, and in freely accessing some regional journals.

What is Historical Archaeology?

We reviewed definitions of historical archaeology from regional and national organizations and found that most centered European colonization (Table 1). If we typically divide Northwest archaeology into “precontact” and “historical” categories, does our work center American colonization, and is this a cause for the minimization of historical archaeology?

Northwest Historic Archaeological Sites

To study how often Northwest archaeologists record precontact and historic archaeological sites, we tallied site data from Washington and Idaho (Table 2). The authors attempted to include Oregon and British Columbia site data but differences in databases made it difficult to collect and compare data. Although data from Washington and Idaho are categorized differently, these tallies indicate that historic-period sites comprise about 37-42% of archaeological sites recorded in Washington and Idaho.

Table 1. Historical Archaeology Definitions.

Organization	Definition
<i>Society for Historical Archaeology</i>	The study of the material remains of past societies that also left behind documentary and oral histories.
<i>National Park Service</i>	Studies the remains of cultures with the aid of written history. In the Old World, historical archeology covers a period of several thousand years; however, in the Americas, historical archeology is limited to the period after the arrival of Europeans.
<i>Washington Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation</i>	Telling the story of the Euroamerican influence.
<i>Oregon State Historic Preservation Office</i>	A part of archaeology which studies the material remains of past societies that also left behind some other form of historical record.
<i>Encyclopedia of Historical Archaeology</i>	The archaeological investigation of any past culture that has developed a literate tradition; the study of the ‘modern world’; the historical and cultural conditions that have shaped our world since about AD 1500.
<i>International Handbook of Historical Archaeology</i>	The archaeology of those societies developing in the wake of the European Middle Ages (where the Reformation, mercantile capitalism, and industrialization all ruptured the previous order of things) and of those emerging in regions of the world that were colonized by Europeans and that developed along a new multiethnic trajectory.

Table 2. Northwest Archaeological Site Categories.

State	Precontact Sites/ Category Entries		Historic Sites/ Category Entries		Multicomponent Sites/ Category Entries		Total Sites/ Category Entries
<i>Idaho</i>	30,416	55%	20,376	37%	3,476	6%	55,072
<i>Washington</i>	36,081	55%	27,735	42%	1,915	3%	65,731

Northwest Anthropological Conference Presentations

Is historical archaeology well-represented at the Northwest Anthropological Conference (NWAC)? We analyzed ten NWAC programs (2010-2019) to study how often Northwest archaeologists report the findings of their historical research at NWAC (Table 3). The data on historical archaeology cannot be directly compared to precontact archaeology presentations, as many presentations are focused on anthropological methodologies and studies, cultural resource management practices, public outreach, museums, etc. Over a period of ten years, 23% of posters and presentations at NWAC were focused on historical archaeology, which is much lower than the proportion of historical sites recorded.

Northwest Publications

Is historical archaeology well-represented in regional publications? Articles in four of the region’s journals were analyzed over ten years (2010-2019) to study how often Northwest archaeologists publish research on historical archaeology (Table 4). Over a period of ten years, 13% of articles in regional journals were focused on historical archaeology.

Table 3. Historical Archaeology Presentations at the Northwest Anthropological Conference.

Year	Historical Archaeology Posters	All Posters	% Posters	Historical Archaeology Presentations	All Presentations	% Presentations	Historical Archaeology Posters and Presentations	All Posters & Presentations	% Posters & Presentations
2019	11	65	17%	29	101	29%	40	166	24%
2018	4	52	8%	29	155	19%	33	207	16%
2017	17	49	35%	36	185	19%	53	234	23%
2016	19	66	29%	42	179	23%	61	245	25%
2015	13	57	23%	33	105	31%	46	162	28%
2014	13	73	18%	32	199	16%	45	272	17%
2013	12	22	55%	57	246	23%	69	268	26%
2012	2	33	6%	34	164	21%	36	197	18%
2011	6	39	15%	40	165	24%	46	204	23%
2010	5	39	13%	35	86	41%	40	125	32%
Total	102	495	21%	367	1,585	23%	469	2,080	23%

Table 4. Northwest Historical Archaeology Publications.

Year	The Midden, Archaeological Society of British Columbia			Journal of Northwest Anthropology			Archaeology in Washington			Idaho Archaeologist			Total		
	Historical	All	%	Historical	All	%	Historical	All	%	Historical	All	%	Historical	All	%
2019	0	14	0%	0	11	0%	-	-	-	0	4	0%	0	29	0%
2018	1	26	4%	0	11	0%	-	-	-	7	10	70%	8	47	17%
2017	1	9	11%	0	11	0%	6	8	75%	1	7	14%	8	35	23%
2016	1	17	6%	1	13	8%	-	-	-	0	8	0%	2	38	5%
2015	-	-	-	1	10	10%	-	-	-	0	4	0%	1	14	7%
2014	-	-	-	0	10	0%	-	-	-	0	2	0%	0	12	0%
2013	-	-	-	2	10	20%	-	-	-	1	6	17%	3	16	19%
2012	1	28	4%	3	14	21%	-	-	-	2	8	25%	6	50	12%
2011	5	24	21%	3	16	19%	-	-	-	1	7	14%	9	47	19%
2010	3	20	15%	3	10	30%	0	1	0%	0	6	0%	6	37	16%
Total	12	138	9%	13	116	11%	6	9	66%	12	62	19%	43	325	13%

Dominant Narratives in Washington State Cultural Resource Assessments

It is a common observation amongst cultural resource management professionals that assessment reports tend to prioritize the history of colonizers, relying on the creation stories of an elite white male dominant narrative (think Lewis and Clark, Robert Gray, etc.) with little mention of the history of Indigenous peoples, women, or any history other than European diasporas. While these cultural narratives are improving, we argue that more work is needed to diversify contexts, so that our profession can better recognize and preserve a more diverse and meaningful history in Washington State. To study the representations of histories in recent assessments, we sampled two of the most recent assessments in each of Washington’s 39 counties (78 reports total).

This pilot study finds that while it is common for historic settings to include Euro-American explorers, fur traders, and miners, archaeologists are reluctant to recognize colonization (Figure 5). In fact, railroad history is more frequently introduced than Native history, and it is slightly more common to mention post-1889 history than it is to mention Treaties or Indian Wars.

Table 5. Context Themes in Recent Washington State Cultural Resource Assessments.

Context Theme	Total Count	% of Sample
<i>Explorers</i>	68	87%
<i>Missionaries</i>	28	36%
<i>Fur Traders/ Miners</i>	65	83%
<i>Man as Solo First Settler/Founder/Owner</i>	20	26%
<i>Railroad</i>	48	62%
<i>Indian Wars & Treaties</i>	56	72%
<i>Colonization</i>	8	10%
<i>Native Ethnohistory</i>	45	58%
<i>Post-1889 History</i>	59	76%
<i>Settler Women</i>	21	27%
<i>Women’s History</i>	24	31%
<i>African Diaspora</i>	4	5%
<i>Asian Diaspora</i>	3	4%
<i>Hispanic Diaspora</i>	0	0%
<i>Total</i>	78	-

Discussion

Is an aversion for historical archaeology in cultural resource management rooted in our profession’s disinterest in recognizing, studying, and preserving the history of colonization, or are there truly fewer significant historical sites to research and publish on? We argue that although it is common to observe historic archaeological sites during cultural resource management fieldwork, our profession is failing to recognize opportunities to better understand the complex and diverse history of the Northwest. Poorly researched historical settings may be an indication of a lack of commitment to finding historic-period archaeological features, and poorly written research designs are likely to result in misrepresenting the significance of an archaeological site. Further, it is common in the Northwest for historical sites to be determined ineligible based on inadequately researched historical settings, in conflict with the ethics of professional archaeology in the Northwest. More research is needed to assess archaeologist’s

outlook and resulting impacts to cultural resources, however we recommend that archaeologists work toward diversifying historical settings and contexts, incorporate these histories into research designs, and consider engaging with historical archaeology worthy of public outreach.

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